

**SURREALISM'S AMERICA:
NOTES ON A VERNACULAR EPISTEMOLOGY**

by
Kate Khatib

A dissertation submitted to Johns Hopkins University in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Baltimore, Maryland
October 2013

Abstract

“Surrealism’s America” is an intellectual history of an important but largely unknown political and artistic underground active in the United States from the mid-1960s until the present day: The Chicago Surrealist Group. Founded in 1966 by artist-revolutionaries Franklin and Penelope Rosemont, the Chicago Surrealist Group has the distinction of being the only indigenous American surrealist formation welcomed into the International Surrealist Movement by founder André Breton. Active participants in the 1960s countercultural milieu, the Chicago Surrealist Group, who coined the now-ubiquitous phrase “Make Love, Not War,” were the first to develop a mode of surrealist praxis steeped in, and born out of, a quintessentially American context.

On the basis of independent archival research and personal interviews with Franklin and Penelope Rosemont, and other surviving members of the Chicago Surrealist Group, this dissertation traces the origins of this interesting configuration of activity, providing short biographies for the Group’s major players, and devoting significant work to understanding and explaining the political, theoretical, and artistic precursors whose influence helped to shape the nascent movement in its earliest years—figures ranging from the great urban anthropologist St. Clair Drake, who taught many of the Chicago surrealists at Roosevelt University in the 1960s, to Walter Benjamin, whose suggestion that the past be treated “politically” the surrealists took to heart, to the IWW martyr and labor hero Joe Hill, whose life Franklin Rosemont would later chronicle in his *Joe Hill* book.

Through a series of close readings of key texts, as well as conversations with the surviving surrealists, the author zeros in on the writing of history as a central concern for the Chicago surrealist group, who took up this project as it was originally conceived by Breton and Louis Aragon in 1920s France with great skill and fervor, turning Breton’s preoccupation with the reordering of events and individuals into a central methodological principle for political and theoretical action. This project seeks not only to explain this principle, but also to demonstrate the unique value of the historical project of the Chicago Surrealist Group by understanding the group’s history as they, themselves, composed it.

Acknowledgements

“Surrealism’s America” is a book more than ten years in the making, originally conceptualized as a thesis project under the direction of Hent de Vries and Mieke Bal at the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis at the Universiteit van Amsterdam, then revised and refined over the course of countless conversations with colleagues at Johns Hopkins University and members of the Chicago Surrealist Group. As such, it has become something of a collaborative project in my mind, though any errors, omissions, or obstinacies are wholly my own.

First and foremost, this project could not have been completed without the encouragement and involvement of the Chicago surrealist group, and especially Franklin and Penelope Rosemont and Paul and Beth Garon. Over the past ten years, this remarkable group of people have welcomed me into their homes and their hearts, sharing their ideas and ideals, their memories of the past and their dreams for the future. I count myself as extraordinarily lucky to have found my way into their sphere of influence, and I am honored every day to call them my friends and comrades. The death of Franklin Rosemont in 2009 was a heavy blow to the international surrealist movement, and took its toll on all of us; I am grateful for the time I was able to spend with Franklin in the years before his death, though, and I can’t help but smile every time I think of his response to an early outline for this project: “It seems that Kate knows us better than we know ourselves.” If that is true, then it is only because of the willingness of Franklin, Penelope, Paul, and Beth to bring me into their world and help me to understand.

I have been fortunate over the course of my academic career to have remarkable teachers and mentors without whose guidance and encouragement I would certainly never have made it this far. I cannot express enough my gratitude to Neil Hertz, my dissertation supervisor, for his willingness to work on this project with me, and his ability to see and make clear the things that I had overlooked; this project has improved immeasurably thanks to his suggestions and edits. Hent de Vries took me in as a Masters student at the Universiteit van Amsterdam, supported me through my MA and MPhil, and ultimately encouraged me to come to Johns Hopkins to pursue my PhD. It is thanks to his seminars that I first began to understand the idea of treating the past politically, an insight that forms the central basis for this work. I am deeply grateful to Mieke Bal, Richard Macksey, Simon During, Peter Jelavich, Ron Walters, Jean-Michel Rabaté, and especially Craig Saper for their seminars and after-class discussions at Johns Hopkins University, the Universiteit van Amsterdam, and the University of Pennsylvania. Thanks too are due to Paul Buhle, David Roediger, Ron Sakolsky, Peter Linebaugh, George Caffentzis, Silvia Federici, Jane Bennett, William Connolly, and Lester Spence, all of whom provided essential encouragement and moral support at various points during the composition of this project.

Key portions of this text were supported by a series of writing grants: the summer fellowship program in Women, Gender, and Sexuality at Johns Hopkins University provided necessary support during my research into Toyen’s concept of surrealism as a “community of ethical views”; research on surrealism’s early race politics and on the work of Aimé Césaire was supported by a grant from the Center for Africana Studies at JHU. A Dean’s Teaching Fellowship allowed me to develop a curriculum around “Surrealist Narratives,” which

formed the basis for the analysis of Aragon's *Paris Peasant* and other surrealist texts on the city. And, finally, at least a third of this dissertation was composed during a retreat at the Blue Mountain Center, organized by Dara Greenwald, Josh MacPhee, and Malav Kanuga, on the topic of "Cultural Workers and the Commons." Dara Greenwald, who invited me to participate in the program at Blue Mountain Center, lost her battle with cancer at the age of 40 less than two years after that retreat, but I will be forever grateful to her for convincing me not to give up on this project. Dara wasn't a surrealist, but she embodied surrealism's playful and inquisitive spirit in every aspect of her life, and I, like so many others, am a better person for having known her.

My personal and professional world is filled with a lively cast of characters who inform and educate me every moment of every day: the Red Emma's collective infuriates and inspires me in equal measures, and I wouldn't have it any other way. I owe a debt of gratitude to the AK Press collective, with whom I have worked for the past five years, for helping me to hone my editing skills so that I might turn them on my own writing, and for allowing me the flexibility I needed to take time off to write at various points. Countless collaborative rants and brainstorming sessions with my friend and fellow traveller Margaret Killjoy have helped to continuously fuel the fires of anarcho-surrealist excitement over the past eight years. And without the love, the support, and the constant encouragement of my immediate family, I would have given up long ago and moved on to something else.

Yet no one individual has influenced the composition of this project more than my partner, John Duda. Every insight in this book has been shared with John at various points over the years, and most have been debated, discussed, and further developed over the course of our conversations. From the formation of the Philadelphia Radical Surrealist Front to our first meeting with the Chicago surrealists, from Philadelphia, to Amsterdam, to Chicago, to Baltimore, and all points in-between, John has been my chief interlocutor and constant companion, playing cheerleader and challenger with equal measures of care. It is impossible to quantify the contribution he has made to my intellectual and political development, but I'm sure he will recognize more than a few of his own ideas and insights peeking through in the pages that follow.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Part One: Toward a Transmutative Practice.....	8
Chapter One: American Surrealism.....	9
Chapter Two: Surrealism's Critical Epistemology.....	46
Chapter Three: Automatic Theologies, Profane Illuminations.....	69
Chapter Four: The Alchemy of the Everyday.....	92
Part Two: Toward a Vernacular Surrealism.....	117
Chapter Five: Surrealism's Other America	118
Chapter Six: Vernacular Surrealism and Urban Anthropology.....	148
Chapter Seven: A Hobo's Theory of History.....	181
Epilogue.....	205

List of Illustrations

Page 41: Make Love Not War button designed by the Chicago Surrealist Group, 1965
(image courtesy of *Creative Review*)

Page 53: The Surrealist Map of the World, 1929 (image courtesy of *Race Traitor*)

Introduction

Anyone who has spent time with the inimitable co-founder of the Chicago Surrealist Group, Franklin Rosemont, has probably heard the story of Rosemont's exchange with Nelson Algren: "*Surrealism? In Chicago?*" the novelist laughingly replied to Rosemont's invitation to participate in the Chicago Group's activities. "You're going to need a lot of luck!"¹ It was 1975, and Algren was about to leave the city for a new life in Paterson, New Jersey; the Chicago Surrealist Group had already been active for almost a decade. Algren didn't know it, but "luck" wasn't really what was at stake; *chance* on the other hand figured prominently in the development of the first homegrown American Surrealist Movement, which catalyzed around Rosemont in Chicago in the summer of 1966. In her 1999 collection, *Surrealist Experiences*, Penelope Rosemont, Franklin's partner and fellow revolutionary, recounts the winds that blew the Rosemonts precisely into the center of surrealism—and in particular, into the circle around André Breton in Paris, in the late '60s, just months before Breton's death:

At the age of twenty-three, I abruptly left school, quit my job, packed up my furniture, gave up my apartment, bought a one-way ticket to Paris and set out to meet the surrealists. My traveling companion was my fellow dreamer, Franklin Rosemont.²

The plan was to stop off in London first, where the pair were to visit with anarchist comrades and "brush up" on their French. But, according to Penelope, "the English immigration authorities had other ideas (this was during the Vietnam War) and we were sent

¹ Personal conversation, August 3, 2007; but see also Ron Sakolsky's excellent introduction to *Surrealist Subversions: Rants, Writings & Images by the Surrealist Movement in the United States*, ed. Ron Sakolsky (New York: Autonomedia, 2002), 23.

² Penelope Rosemont, *Surrealist Experiences* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Company, 1999), 1.

directly on to Paris” where, as the Rosemonts discovered, the surrealists had gathered for what would turn out to be the final International Surrealist Exhibition held during Breton’s lifetime—and, “as chance would have it” the exhibition happened to be just three blocks away from the hotel the pair had chosen (“with the help of *Europe on \$5 a Day*”).³ From that moment on, “a whole chain of events began to unfold,” Penelope would later recall.

“Thanks to a spiteful, mean-spirited British immigration bureaucrat, our participation in the international surrealist movement started early, and could hardly have been more auspicious.”⁴ In the weeks and months that followed, the Rosemonts would meet not just André and Elisa Breton, but Man Ray, Toyen, Jehan Mayoux, Joyce Mansour, and the other remaining members of the French Surrealist Group, participating in the Group’s daily meetings at the Café Promenade de Vénus, discussing the current political situation of surrealism in the United States, and even signing one of the Group’s collective declarations.

The French surrealists were as taken with these two young Americans as Franklin and Penelope were with the entire atmosphere that surrounded Breton, even in his final years. The Rosemonts returned to Chicago that summer with the blessing of surrealism’s remaining founders: the perspective of the Chicagoans was, as Gérard Legrand would write the following year, “the most attractive that we have seen for surrealism in a long time.”⁵ Over the course of the next four decades, the Rosemonts and their fellow travelers would carry out one of the most sustained, politically-grounded programs of surrealist revolt that the world has ever seen—so much so that, in 2001, Alain Joubert, himself a longtime participant in Parisian surrealism, would write that the Chicagoans, along with the Czechs, had founded the most important surrealist group of the twenty-first century.

³ Penelope Rosemont, *Surrealist Experiences*, 1.

⁴ Penelope Rosemont, *Surrealist Experiences*, 2.

⁵ Ron Sakolsky, “Surrealist Subversion in Chicago: The Forecast Is Hotter Than Ever!” in *Surrealist Subversions*, 25.

How exactly did surrealism find its way to the shores of Lake Michigan in the summer of '66? This project seeks to trace the development of America's first and most important homegrown surrealist movement in the context of the rise of student radicalism and the New Left, the black power movement, and the American tradition of autonomist Marxism. As the Rosemonts and fellow Chicago surrealist (and blues historian) Paul Garon would write in 1996, "Surrealism remains an *international* movement, resistant to all national and regional chauvinism. Each country, however, imposes certain cultural and political conditions that inevitably affect surrealism's course of development within it." Like so many other cities where surrealism has unexpectedly and, indeed, almost inexplicably taken root, "surrealism in Chicago has certain distinguishing qualities: experiences and emphases that give it a character of its own."⁶ Influenced by C. Wright Mills's sociology of power relations and especially by St. Clair Drake's new project of urban anthropology, steeped in the '60s counterculture of black radicalism and anti-racist action, the Chicago Group's critical approach to the analysis of the everyday world around them was inherently innovative and fully *present*, recasting surrealism as a critical—and, indeed, *political*—epistemology in the service of workingclass emancipation. Under the magical touch of the Rosemonts, surrealism in the United States became the inheritor not just of the poetic tradition that the Parisian surrealists had channeled through a radical re-reading of Rimbaud and Lautréamont, but inheritor, too, of the militant struggles of the American working class. Alongside Breton, Aragon, Péret, and Césaire, the Chicago Group listed the most outstanding figures of workingclass counterculture as their central influences—Joe Hill, Lucy Parsons, Bugs Bunny,

⁶ Franklin Rosemont, Penelope Rosemont, and Paul Garon, "Surrealism: The Chicago Idea," in *The Forecast is Hot: Tracts and Other Collective Declarations of the Surrealist Movement in the United States 1966-1976* (Chicago: Black Swan Press, 1996), xx.

and Peetie Wheatstraw all occupied important positions in the American surrealist canon. So, too, did Malcolm X, Frantz Fanon, and Herbert Marcuse, among others.

Looking back along the many paths of the surrealist project, even back to the time of its inception in Paris in the wake of World War I, the Chicago Group's explicit project of rewriting history along the lines of a wholly unexpected, and at times inexplicable, trajectory seems, as I shall argue in the chapters that follow, unexpectedly logical. The surrealists had always been engaged in the project of retelling history from the standpoint of the imagination, of transmuting historical elements into a cohesive constellation, with surrealism at its center, a fact already clear to Walter Benjamin in 1929 when he first began to discuss the epistemological significance of the surrealist movement in Paris. For Benjamin, what surrealism offered was a way of treating the past *politically* rather than *historically*, not suggesting the irrelevance of history, but instead demonstrating the immense force that the past exerts on any present, no matter how future-oriented it may be. Breton, Soupault, Aragon, and the others embraced the outmoded, destitute objects of an increasingly industrialized and nationalist France, and thus adopted the intermingling of past and present, of dream and reality, as a methodological principle. While remaining politically grounded in the present, the Paris surrealists railed against Jean-Paul Sartre's positing of the engaged intellectual and invoked their own central concept: *automatism*, a radical form of spontaneous experience that was intended to bring the world of intoxication into direct contact with the material, everyday world. Rather than moving away from either real or imagined objects, the aim of surrealist praxis was to bring the two together, by way of something like a purely immanent, internal model: "a real *insulation*," according to Breton, "thanks to which, the mind on finding itself ideally withdrawn from everything, can begin to occupy itself with its own life, in which the attained [reality] and the desired [imaginary] no longer exclude one

another.”⁷

The ability to see community where others saw only chaos and disjunction—perhaps the greatest achievement of the surrealist movement as a whole—shows itself most clearly in the surrealist interventions on the historical plane. As early as 1924, in the first surrealist manifesto, Breton was already engaged in the project of reclaiming and reclassifying a diverse set of literary and political figures within a wholly new historical trajectory; events as diverse as the “discovery” of the manuscripts of Abraham the Jew by the fourteenth-century alchemist Nicholas Flamel, the Rif uprising in Morocco led by the Berber revolutionary Abdel el-Krim, the anarchist attack on the offices of *L’Action Française*, the victory of Toussaint Louverture and the Haitian slave rebellion in the French Antilles, the introduction of Freudian psychoanalysis to France, and the Haussmannization of the Paris arcades would become integral points within the historical constellation that Breton and his fellow surrealist revolutionaries constructed over the course of their first decade of activity. Considering the past from the vantage point of the imagination, eschewing traditional notions of history as a linear progression of causes and effects, the surrealists were able to put forth an entirely new kind of historical writing, beginning with the first surrealist manifesto, and encompassing texts like Louis Aragon’s epistemological novel *Paris Peasant*, Breton’s *Nadja*, and others. In essence, the surrealists gave form to a literary and historical genre that rivaled Benjamin’s particular brand of dialectical materialism in its scope and immediacy, a point made even more stringent by Breton’s suggestion in the second surrealist manifesto that the project of dialectical materialism be applied to questions beyond the “solution of social problems.” “I really fail to see—some narrow-minded revolutionaries notwithstanding,” Breton wrote, “why we should refrain from supporting the Revolution, provided we view the problems of

⁷ André Breton, “Surrealism and Painting,” trans. S. W. Taylor, *Surrealism and Painting* (Boston: MFA Publications, 2002), 4.

love, dreams, madness, art, and religion from the same angle [as the communist revolutionaries do].”⁸ As the boundaries of the movement broadened throughout the 1930s and 1940s to include important international collaborations, especially with surrealists in the Czech Republic, in the French Caribbean, and, of course, in the United States during the development of the New Left, surrealism’s project of continually rewriting its own history with every new development would serve as a kind of Ariadne’s thread that bound together each new, and entirely unique, manifestation of the surrealist project. Indeed, as Franklin Rosemont suggests, it is precisely the disjunctive continuity of surrealism that makes it possible to consider the movement as a whole: “Paradoxical though it may seem, the autonomy and diversity of surrealism’s particular local manifestations are the *sine qua non* of the global movement’s universal unity and coherence.”⁹

Thus, to fully illuminate the growth and development of surrealism in the United States, it is necessary to first understand the history of surrealism as the surrealists themselves understood it—and, critically, to understand the theoretical ground rules that define the very possibility of that history’s existence. This project, then, is as much about how surrealists think and write about history, as it is about the trajectory of a specifically American formation. The project in the pages that follows highlights these two different, but related projects, and is grouped into two sections that cover a fairly diverse set of historical and literary concerns. The first chapter offers a brief narrative history of the development of the Chicago surrealist group, focusing specifically on the trajectories of Franklin and Penelope Rosemont, Chicago surrealism’s principal architects. The remainder of the first part of the

⁸ André Breton, “Second Manifesto of Surrealism,” *Manifestoes of Surrealism* (Ann Arbor: U Michigan P, 1972), 140.

⁹ Franklin Rosemont, Penelope Rosemont, and Paul Garon, “Surrealism: The Chicago Idea,” xx.

book, Chapters 2-4, covers the birth and development of a specifically surrealist project of historical materialism, and reconsiders surrealism as a political theory of experience, using Walter Benjamin and Franklin Rosemont as principal interpreters of Breton's complex historical project. Part 2 traces the trajectory of surrealism out of France, through the Caribbean and Haiti in the thought of Aimé Césaire and C.L.R. James, and into the United States as a part of the movement to define and protect a specifically black experience of society in the work of St. Clair Drake, whose mentorship greatly influenced the young Franklin Rosemont; James's work provides an interesting link between the quasi-Marxist dialectical materialism that appears early-on in French surrealism, and the later involvement that the American surrealists have with the tradition of autonomist Marxism that feeds into the development of the New Left. The final chapter of this book is given over to an analysis of Franklin Rosemont's *Joe Hill*, arguably one of the most important surrealist histories ever completed, and sets Joe Hill—the quintessential American hobo—up as the subject of surrealist history *par excellence*. The entire work concludes with an Epilogue that considers the vital role that Franklin Rosemont played in sustaining a worldwide presence of surrealism even today. Rosemont, whose mentorship and friendship provided the inspiration and much of the historical detail for this study, died in 2009, halfway through the composition of this book.

Part One: Toward a Transmutative Practice

“With the formation of the surrealist movement the poetic effort has attained its highest stage of development. What had been only individual, sporadic, unconscious—and therefore easily defeated—with surrealism becomes collective, systematic, conscious, invincible.”

—Franklin Rosemont, “Freedom of the Marvelous”¹⁰

¹⁰ Franklin Rosemont, “The Freedom of the Marvelous,” in *Marvelous Freedom, Vigilance of Desire* (Catalog of the 1976 World Surrealist Exhibition), 6.

Chapter One: American Surrealism¹¹

“Franklin Rosemont doesn’t look like a Surrealist,” reads a line in my hastily scribbled notes on the back of a series of receipts, written as the Chicago “L” carried me away from my first meeting with the founder of contemporary American surrealism. What had I been expecting? Perhaps to meet a man dressed impeccably in a black suit and a crisp white shirt? Or wearing a set of Sun Ra-esque robes? Or that he would insist on us all ordering drinks in varying hues of green, as did surrealism’s founder, André Breton, at the height of his megalomania? Tall, lanky, and rapidly graying, dressed in a short-sleeved plaid shirt and baggy, faded black pants, Rosemont looked more like someone’s slightly unkempt Marxist uncle than the inheritor of one of the world’s most enduring traditions of political and poetic revolt.

I had known about Franklin Rosemont and the work of the Chicago group for a number of years, since a friend had discovered the fourth and final issue of the Chicago-based journal, *Arsenal: Surrealist Subversions*, in a second-hand bookshop in San Francisco, and brought it home to the small community of artist-activists in Philadelphia, where I lived at the time. Many members of my affinity group in West Philadelphia were already quite taken with surrealism as a kind of political-aesthetic ideology. I’d read Breton’s manifesto in high school and been captivated, and was fortunate enough to fall into the crowd around a beloved professor at my college, who taught avant-garde film and literature as though he were living it. We came out of those classes with a sense that surrealism held some real promise for the kinds of political work we wanted to do, but we couldn’t quite see how to

¹¹ Much of the detail in this chapter is indebted to Ron Sakolsky’s excellent introduction (unofficially co-written, as he tells me, with Franklin and Penelope Rosemont) in *Surrealist Subversions*, “Surrealist Subversion in Chicago.”

take the various experiments with automatism we'd been trying, and the copious amounts of René Crevel and Benjamin Péret we'd been reading, and apply them to the real-life struggles we were fighting as activists in late-'90s America. Enter *Arsenal*:

We are living, precariously enough, in a strange place called the United States, a nation founded on genocide, and whose government, the most murderous in history, is the deadliest enemy of human freedom in the world today ... we surrealists are more than ever communists, anarchists, atheists, irreconcilable revolutionists, implacable enemies of things as they are, unrepentant seekers of a truly free society....

“And how to we reach this truly free society?”

Start by dreaming.

Those who don't know how to cross their bridges before they come to them will never get anywhere.¹²

There was something striking in that—the general gist seemed to be that one had to *imagine* what a better world might look like before one could change it. This was the beginning of the movement against an increasingly globalized world, against the spread of structural adjustment policies and the hegemony of global capital, which had begun to reach a crisis point, the years just before things exploded in Seattle in 1999 at the annual meeting of the World Trade Organization, fanning the flames of what would become a decade of creative revolt around the globe.¹³ A few years later, “Another World Is Possible” would become the

¹² Editors, “Now's the Time,” in *Arsenal: Surrealist Subversion* 4 (1989), 3.

¹³ There are numerous books and essays that document the development of the anti-globalization movement, but on Seattle 1999 in particular, see the essays collected in David Solnit and Rebecca Solnit, *The Battle for the Story of the Battle of Seattle* (Oakland: AK Press, 2009). As Americans, it's tempting to place ourselves at the center of the anti-globalization movement, and suggest that Seattle 1999 was the spark that ignited the fire; in reality, the anti-globalization movement grew out of a larger and longer wave of struggle against imperialism, which has its roots in the global south. A key defining moment for the movement that Seattle 1999 would help to define is unquestionably the 1994 uprising of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) in Chiapas, Mexico. The Zapatistas, who are

slogan of the fully-formed anti-globalization movement, but it seemed that the surrealists had hit upon the idea first.

So, we started researching these “Chicago surrealists” and discovered more and more of their work; we found copies of the first three issues of *Arsenal* after scouring used bookstores all across the country (all three issues for \$10—the bookseller didn’t quite understand the treasure trove he had managed to uncover!). We organized a surrealist group in Philadelphia, we operated as a collective, determined to demonstrate, through the practical application of imagination, what a different world might look like. In 2000, we took on a central role in the organizing around the Republican National Convention, which was due to invade our city that August. Coming on the heels of the uprising in Seattle, and subsequent insurrections in Washington DC and New York City, the Philadelphia police¹⁴ weren’t taking any chances. They infiltrated and then seized the West Philadelphia warehouse which served as the puppet-making headquarters, arresting 75 activists guilty of nothing more than building giant papier-mâché dolls, and confiscating (“jailing”) hundreds of brightly-colored

still active and autonomous today, blend together creative action and armed insurgency in ways that are not incommensurable with surrealist practice. Although I have not been able to uncover any surrealist writings that specifically discuss the Zapatista insurgency, nor have I seen any mention of surrealism in the writings of Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos (widely acknowledged to be the key theoretician, and symbolic figurehead of the Zapatista movement), it’s worth noting that the two movements share a surprising number of theoretical characteristics. See Marcos’ writings in Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, *The Speed of Dreams: Selected Writings 2001-2007* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2007). See also Mark Engler, “Anti-globalization movement,” in *Encyclopedia of Activism and Social Justice*, eds. G. Anderson, & K. Herr (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2007): 151-156.

¹⁴ Interestingly, the tactics of counterinsurgency developed by the Philadelphia Police force during the 2000 Republican National Convention would become the standard for protest policing over the next decade. Then-commissioner John Timoney was widely regarded for his “progressive” policing practices, and served as a security advisor for the World Economic Forum in New York in 2002, before becoming chief of police in Miami, where he presided over the law enforcement crackdown on protesters at the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) Summit in 2003, authorizing the use of rubber bullets, tear gas, tasers, batons, and electrified shields to “control” non-violent demonstrations. (A 2003 film, *The Miami Model*, explores the controversy around Timoney’s policing tactics.) For a period of years, it seemed to be the case that wherever there was a mass mobilization, Timoney would turn up in some way, shape, or form. In 2011, Timoney, who resigned from the Miami force in 2010, was hired by the Ministry of the Interior in Bahrain to bring his “Miami model” of policing to the region, in an attempt to squash the pro-democracy uprising that had broken out in February of that year. Numerous organizations, as well as several noted journalists, protested the hiring, citing Timoney’s “past human rights violations.” See Robert Mackey, “An Activist Stands Her Ground in Bahrain,” *The New York Times* (December 1, 2011); and Ryan Devereaux, “John Timoney: The notorious police chief sent to reform forces in Bahrain,” *The Guardian* (February 16, 2012).

puppets.¹⁵ Surely this went against every instinct of a surrealist! We decided the time was right to contact the Chicago group, so we wrote a letter asking them to issue a statement in support of the puppets. We never received a response.

Years later, sitting in the Heartland Café in Rogers Park, surrounded by panels from Paul Buhle's marvelous *Wobblies!* comic book (an exhibition installed in honor of the 100th anniversary of the IWW, the centennial celebrations of which I had traveled to Chicago to attend), Rosemont somewhat suspiciously asked me what I had to do with surrealism. My nerves already strained, I rambled for a quarter of an hour about my interest in Breton, how I had worked on what I considered to be surrealist projects for the past ten years, how I had come to see the work I was doing in the squatting community and in collectively-run projects as aligned with surrealism's communalist impulses, about how we had started the Philadelphia Radical Surrealist Front after reading *Arsenal* and had put our artistic-activist abilities to work in the struggle to free political prisoner and former Black Panther Mumia Abu-Jamal.

Winding down, I finally stammered "We wrote you a letter, actually ... when they stole all of our puppets?" Recognition dawned on his face.

"Oh, that was you? *Now* I know who you are!"

And so our travels began.

Franklin Rosemont was born in 1943, and grew up in a working-class family in the Chicago suburb of Maywood, which was also home to the future Black Panther, Fred Hampton.¹⁶

¹⁵ On the use of puppets as protest tools in the context of the anti-globalization movement, and the fear-response this strategy provoked in the state-control apparatus, see David Graeber, "On the Phenomenology of Giant Puppets: Broken Windows, Jars of Urine, and the Cosmological Role of the Police in American Culture," in *Possibilities* (Oakland: AK Press, 2007): 375-415.

¹⁶ A few blocks away lay Waldheim Cemetery, where Rosemont's body was buried in 2009, facing the monument to the Haymarket martyrs, a stone's throw away from the grave of Emma Goldman.

His father, Henry P. Rosemont, was a “working class intellectual,”¹⁷ a member of Chicago’s Typographical Union No. 16, and a well-respected labor agitator who played a key role in the 22-month Chicago newspaper strike against the Taft-Hartley Act, which had been enacted in 1947. Henry was also instrumental in starting and sustaining the WCFL radio show “Meet the Union Printers,” which aired daily until the strike ended in 1949, and is now seen as one of the more successful attempts to use media as a tool in support of union agitation.¹⁸

Franklin’s mother, Sally Kaye Rosemont, was a jazz-era musician, who played in local speakeasies as a teenager, worked as a radio comedian, and eventually became president of the Organized Women Musicians of the Musician’s Union Local 10-208 in Chicago.

From the mid-1960s onward, the surrealist movement in the United States unquestionably revolved around Franklin Rosemont, who had discovered surrealism at the age of fifteen when he unexpectedly encountered Paul Eluard and Benjamin Péret’s 1925 surrealist maxim, “Elephants are contagious,” in *The Reader’s Companion to World Literature*, and that “started bells ringing and lights flashing.”¹⁹ Already bored with the limited educational opportunities offered by his Maywood public high school, Franklin dropped out after his third year, and spent his days in the library of that venerable modernist art haven, the Art Institute of Chicago, reading everything he could find on surrealism, as well as on black radicalism and jazz culture. With some friends, he formed the first “Rhapsodist”

¹⁷ Ron Sakolsky, “Surrealist Subversion in Chicago,” 28. According to Penelope Rosemont, Henry was a veritable goldmine of information on subjects ranging from the Civil War to US labor politics. But like many working-class intellectuals, Henry’s brilliance tended to shine through in the most unofficial of situations, taking the form of spontaneous lectures on a wide variety of topics to the assembled family and friends around the house. Penelope tried to record some of Henry’s discussions, but despite his early involvement in radio, the presence of a tape-recorder seemed to change his disposition and “he would just start thinking and thinking about what he was going to say, and it would change the whole thing.” Penelope took to recording him covertly, on a bulky old taperecorder bundled up in her bag, keeping an eye on the time and “running into the kitchen to change the tape when it was about to run out” (Personal conversation, 02-18-2010).

¹⁸ See Nathan Godfried, *WCFL: Chicago’s Voice of Labor, 1926–78* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Chapter 9 (pp. 239–72) discusses the Chicago newspaper strike and the use of radio as a tool for political agitation in some detail. See also Henry P. Rosemont’s own account of the strike in *American Labor’s First Strike: Articles on Benjamin Franklin, The 1786 Philadelphia Journeymen’s Strike, Early Printers’ Unions in the U.S., & Their Legacy* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 2007).

¹⁹ Ron Sakolsky, “Surrealist Subversion in Chicago,” 29.

movement, a group of young dreamers (“militant poets and pranksters all, and not one over seventeen,” according to Franklin) whose fundamental activities consisted of writing deliriously frenzied poems, performed randomly and rather illegally in a variety of public places including Waldheim Cemetery and Prince Castle (a local burger joint), and graffiti-ing “Elephants are contagious” all over Maywood.²⁰ A somewhat silly, youthful lark, for sure, but Franklin Rosemont would later highlight the activities of the Rhapsodist Movement as playing an important role in the twentieth century’s “long succession of ‘avant-gardes,’” a forerunner to the focused political fervor that would mark the later incarnations of Chicago surrealism:

Few avant-garde movements enjoyed so brief yet so intense a life, and I doubt whether any literary or artistic current before or since produced less than we did in the way of “works.” Rhapsodism was in fact less a poetic movement ... than a way of applying poetry to daily life. Recognizing that certain rare moments in our lives radiate wonder, excitement, curiosity, and pleasure, we maintained that the central aim of poetry was to multiply those moments of perturbation and thus to create the conditions for a new (poetic) way of life for all. We saw ourselves, collectively, as the *spurs* ... of such moments.²¹

In Rosemont’s terms, Rhapsodist “events” were an attempt to jolt Maywood’s working class population out of their everyday routine by creating these “moments of perturbation.” These events were something different, a change in the status quo, a confusion, a reminder that events in the world don’t always follow a logical pattern, and, more than anything, an attempt to make people laugh. Even at an early age, Rosemont

²⁰ The best, and possibly only actual history of the Rhapsodist Movement is Rosemont’s own, told in the space of a mere three pages in his essay, “To Be Revolutionary in Everything: The *Rebel Worker* Story, 1964-68,” in *Dancin’ In the Streets: Anarchists, IWWs, Surrealists, Situationists & Provos in the 1960s as recorded in the pages of The Rebel Worker and Heatwave*, ed. Franklin Rosemont and Charles Radcliffe (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 2005), pp. 10-12.

²¹ Franklin Rosemont, “To Be Revolutionary in Everything,” 11.

understood the vast importance of humor in encouraging a culture of wonder and awe in the everyday world.

In 1962, Franklin enrolled at Roosevelt University, “then a working class commuter school with a Left-leaning faculty and a substantial African-American and foreign-student enrollment,” which was willing to admit him as a “special” student despite his truncated high school career.²² Needless to say, Roosevelt was, at the time, something of a hotbed of American radicalism. Originally chartered in 1945 as Thomas Jefferson College in response to the threat of institutionalized racism in the admissions policies at Central YMCA College in Chicago, the school’s name was changed to Roosevelt College two weeks later, after the death of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt on April 12, 1945, just days before the founding conference of the United Nations.²³ Like FDR himself, his namesake university had from its very beginnings a strong commitment to American liberalism, and to the working class, as well as a desire to foster greater racial and economic equality in the world of higher education. Roosevelt University, which Eleanor Roosevelt worked tirelessly to promote in the decade that followed the school’s founding, strove to “provide educational opportunities for persons of both sexes and of various races on equal terms and to maintain a teaching faculty which is both free and responsible for the discovery and dissemination of the truth.”²⁴ This meant equal admissions opportunities for women and men, for black students, as well as white students, and for young people from around the world. It also meant a strong commitment to diversity in the teaching staff—not just racial and gender diversity, but diversity in ideas and approaches, and pedagogies. Students had access to a wide variety of evening classes, in addition to a highly flexible daytime course schedule,

²² Ron Sakolsky, “Surrealist Subversion in Chicago,” 30.

²³ See “Our History” on the Roosevelt University website, <http://www.roosevelt.edu/About/History.aspx> (accessed 10-3-2012). The college was rededicated to both FDR and Eleanor Roosevelt in 1959.

²⁴ Roosevelt University, “Our History.” The words are attributed to Eleanor Roosevelt.

giving the large working-class student body the opportunity to craft a program of study that enabled them to obtain their degrees while working to support themselves. At a moment when the student debt crisis in the United States has reached an epic scale, prompting widespread calls for an international jubilee for student debt, Roosevelt University's early commitment to providing progressive higher education for the working-class students of America seems almost unfathomable.²⁵ This inherent liberalism, coupled with the strong commitment to social justice in both admissions and curriculum, attracted a wide assortment of radicals to the university over the years, and, perhaps unsurprisingly, resulted in an increasing radicalization of the student body over the following two decades.

It was at Roosevelt, conveniently located in Chicago's downtown Loop, that the first glimmers of the Chicago surrealist group began to take shape. Though the Chicago group didn't *exactly* grow out of the student movement, its earliest incarnations revolved around a group of students, and had direct ties to radical student and youth organizations like the Student Peace Union (SPU), Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). The world of student organizing is often times—and often of necessity—a limited, temporally bounded one. Subsequently, there is a tendency amongst many observers (and participants, too) to simply dismiss campus organizing and activism as something of a youthful indiscretion, a passing fancy, albeit one which makes an impact in a particular context, but ultimately gives way after graduation to the pressures of conformity with the world outside the university. Surrealism in Chicago certainly did begin in this sort of a context, but it can hardly be seen as ephemeral or temporary. In fact, the Chicago Group, which claims a direct link to the original Parisian surrealist group around

²⁵ On the call for an international jubilee, see David Graeber, "Afterword," in *We Are Many: Reflections on Movement Strategy from Occupation to Liberation*, ed. Kate Khatib, Margaret Killjoy, and Mike McGuire (Oakland: AK Press, 2012): pp. 425-435.

André Breton, ultimately became the political mainstay of the international surrealist current, continuing to work, publish, produce, agitate, and dream, even today.

Too, the situations surrounding the founding of the Chicago group and the original Parisian surrealist group are not entire dissimilar. In 2010, looking back on the years of commercial success that certain painters or other cultural producers associated with the movement have met with in the world of art and museums, it is easy to forget that surrealism in Paris began as a group of young men and women who found themselves politicized in response to an increasing turn towards nationalism and warmongering in France. André Breton, Philippe Soupault, Jacques Vaché, and the others were inspired by Dada and politicized by the Rif uprising and the dark days of World War One. Franklin Rosemont and his co-conspirators were inspired by the Beats, and politicized, like so many others of their generation, by the nuclear arms race and the Vietnam War.

Some, like Penelope Bartik (later Rosemont), had been political activists long before they found themselves at Roosevelt University. “I don’t know if I would say that Marxism was more important than Surrealism,” she mused in one of our conversations, but pointed out that a strong Marxist background was the foundation upon which she was able to build her surrealism, suggesting that the same was true for Franklin.²⁶ “Even as a child,” she writes in her essay “Adventures with a Crystal Ball,” “I was accused of being a dreamer. I say *accused* because it was never meant as a compliment. The world we live in is so driven by the ‘practical’ affairs of production and consumption that dreaming is virtually a crime.... In fact I always felt like an escaped criminal: always on the run, always in hiding.”²⁷ Born in 1942 in Chicago, Penelope spent her earliest days in “the tight-knit Bohemian community of Old

²⁶ Penelope Rosemont, personal conversation, February 19, 2010.

²⁷ Penelope Rosemont, “Adventures with a Crystal Ball,” in *Surrealist Experiences* (Chicago: Black Swan Press, 2000), 58.

Settlers, Free Thinkers and Club joiners: Odd Fellows, Eastern Star, Masons,” in Berwyn, a suburb nine miles west of the Chicago Loop, which attracted a growing number of Czech families in the years between the World Wars.²⁸ In 1945, her parents purchased the old, abandoned Columbia Yacht Club in Fox Lake, just south of the Illinois/Wisconsin border, where a great many Chicagoans had begun to establish vacation homes, and where one could find the Minneola Hotel and Restaurant—the alleged hideout of the infamous Chicago gangster Al Capone. Moving the entire extended family (a household of eight in which Penelope was the only child) to the lakefront property, Penelope’s parents ran a somewhat simpler and decidedly more sober sort of resort in the old club building, offering room and board, rowboats, and no liquor. “The family,” she writes, “had been carpenters, teamsters, saloon keepers, bakers, cigar makers, accountants, seamstresses, tailors, printers, bookies, and even one cop, also millionaires but never priests or politicians. The last two were looked down on.”²⁹ Though the information she chooses to share about her childhood is limited, in her 2008 autobiographical account of the 1960s counterculture, Penelope devotes a few short pages to her life in Fox Lake, describing her mother (“If my mother entered a room in no time at all everything revolved around her”), and her father (“strong and handsome and quiet. He would sing Wobbly songs to wake me up in the morning”), reveling in the childhood delight of Robin Hood and Bugs Bunny, and the natural beauty of the Great Lakes and the prairies, whose fertile lands would eventually be ravaged by tourism and “subdivided for housing developments.”³⁰

First politicized at the age of 14 by the 1956 revolution in Hungary, Penelope’s

²⁸ Penelope Rosemont, *Dreams and Everyday Life: André Breton, Surrealism, Rebel Worker, sds, and the Seven Cities of Cibola* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Company, 2008), 10. Much of the following biography in miniature is drawn from Penelope’s own account of her childhood in the same volume, as well as from personal conversations with Penelope in February 2010. I am also, once again, indebted to Ron Sakolsky’s expansive introduction to the Chicago surrealists in *Surrealist Subversions*.

²⁹ Penelope Rosemont, *Dreams and Everyday Life*, 11.

³⁰ Penelope Rosemont, *Dreams and Everyday Life*, 12-13.

interest in and commitment to the cause of freedom deepened as the fight around integration in the American South raged on, and the threat of nuclear annihilation filled the air in the late 1950s. An interest in science and in the natural world led her to study Chemistry at Lake Forest College in 1960 but, she says, “[t]here I began to think we needed less chemistry and more peace.”³¹ By 1964, she had enrolled at Roosevelt University, “the school where all the radicals went ... [which is] precisely where I wanted to be.”³²

At the age of 22, Penelope had already cast her fate to the winds of chance, in true surrealist fashion.

Much of my life, I confess, has been an adventure without a map, a building without a blueprint, an experiment without a plan, a path taken by chance, in defiance of the ordinary routes. I relish this.³³

This path of chance would serve Penelope well in her earliest days at Roosevelt University. Arriving early for her first day of classes, coffee in hand, trying to find the classroom for “Social Disorganization,” taught by one Professor Weinberg, Penelope approached a “tall, somewhat tough-looking man in his 20’s with black hair, wearing a leather jacket over a black turtleneck shirt and blue jeans,” whom she spotted reading in the cafeteria, and asked whether he knew where the class was being held. He didn’t, but his friend, who would be arriving soon, did.

“Do you mind if I wait with you?” Penelope asked. The leather-jacketed stranger didn’t mind, and a half-hour’s worth of idle conversation later, the friend arrived, and the trio set off for what would ultimately prove to be a disappointing lecture on urban decay. Yet the meeting was an important one, perhaps *the* most important meeting in the history of

³¹ Penelope Rosemont, *Dreams and Everyday Life*, 14.

³² Penelope Rosemont, *Dreams and Everyday Life*, 1.

³³ Penelope Rosemont, “Beyond Collage,” in *Surrealist Experiences*, 8.

the Chicago Surrealist Group. As Penelope writes:

After the class the three of us walked through the quiet halls and took the elevator down. We walked out on the magnificent Michigan Avenue side. “What do you do when you’re not in school, are you working?” I asked my leather-jacketed comrade.

“I’m working on the revolution,” he replied, smiling.

“Just how?” I challenged, wondering if it was a joke.

“Well, right now we are setting up a bookshop named Solidarity to sell revolutionary literature and serve as a place where we can meet and hold events. We’re on our way there now.”

“Oh. (I was impressed.) Can I go there with you?”

“Of course.” And so we got on the El and went, and yet “I would have gone anywhere with him,” to quote my own memoir written on that day, so strange and wonderful had been our encounter, his name I found out was Franklin Rosemont.³⁴

Chicago surrealism’s history is filled with these kinds of fateful encounters, these happy accidents of chance that ultimately coalesced into the motley crew of poets and revolutionaries who would form the nucleus of the Chicago Group, sustaining it through five decades of experiment and innovation in the poetry of everyday life. Today, few of the “original” Chicago surrealists still participate in the group’s activities. Some, like Franklin, have died; others, like Bernard Marzsalek, now a veteran of InkWorks Press in the San Francisco Bay Area, have moved away, staying in contact through letters, emails, and the occasional publishing project. Others left the group, sometimes over ideological conflicts, sometimes interpersonal ones.³⁵ Yet a few stalwarts remain, perhaps none more committed

³⁴ Penelope Rosemont, *Dreams and Everyday Life*, 4.

³⁵ The truth is that an entire book could and should be written detailing the history of the Chicago Group, examining its ever-fluctuating membership, and the groups it spawned and sparred with. Yet that project would be a

to those earliest dreams of the group of young revolutionaries than blues historian and antiquarian bookseller Paul Garon.

Garon's introduction to the group was, perhaps, a little less fluid, but makes for an equally good story: born and raised in Louisville, Kentucky, Garon, the son of a physician, had a penchant for the great blues musicians of the American tradition, and a deep appreciation of heroin. A rambling man at heart, Garon had "followed the blues to Chicago,"³⁶ where he landed a job at Bob Koester's legendary Jazz Record Mart—while it still occupied a hot, sweaty attic space on Wabash Avenue inside the Loop. Koester, owner of Chicago's Delmark Records, helped to fuel the blues revival of the 1960s, and the job at Jazz Record Mart brought Garon into contact with "such blues giants as Big Joe Williams, Yank Rachell, Johnny Shines and many more."³⁷ Though Garon would go on to distinguish himself as a historian of the blues in the spirit of surrealism, his first contact with Penelope and Franklin came through an essay he had written for the first issue of the short-lived, London-based journal *Heatwave*, edited by British Situationist International member Charles Radcliffe, and intended to serve as a British counterpart to the *Rebel Worker* journal started by the Chicago group. Garon's essay, "The Expanded Journal of Addiction," is almost impossible to read without looking away from the page, so brutal and base is its description of the consciousness of the heroin addict. Descriptive and fantastic, Garon's essay was an anthropological study of his own battle with addiction, at times narrating hallucinations, at

different one than the one at hand here. In this project, I focus specifically on the broad strokes of the formation of the Chicago Group, paying close attention to those individuals whose work contributed directly to the development of the surrealist-as-historian trope that this dissertation explores. The history of the Chicago Group, and of the Rosemonts themselves, is incredibly rich and deserves to be covered more fully than the limits of this study will allow. One hopes that this history will find an appropriate storyteller to explore it, as more and more of this rich detail is being lost to the ravages of time.

³⁶ Paul Garon, personal conversation, February 23, 2010.

³⁷ Ron Sakolsky, "Surrealist Subversion in Chicago," 81.

others veering towards a cry, a desperate plea really, for help.³⁸ Franklin and Penelope had read the piece, and had heard about Paul from Radcliffe, a common friend. Yet the three had never met, sparking an immediate reaction of distrust when, one afternoon in 1967, Garon wandered into Solidarity Bookshop (now in its third location—apparently finding a space willing to rent to a group of beatnik revolutionaries wasn't as easy as it seemed).

Paul wearing a cap and a trench coat came in, tall, wellbuilt, good-looking, he could have been CIA or a detective. In a soft Kentucky drawl, he introduced himself, "Paul Garon from Louisville, I wrote an article for *Heatwave*." We didn't hear the beginning but we knew there were no Americans in *Heatwave*, so we immediately became suspicious.³⁹

Garon tried to make conversation, but Franklin refused to even speak to him.

Penelope, still suspicious, finally asked which essay he had written.

... "The Journal of Addiction." "Oh, Paul Garon, Charles' friend, the heroin addict," I said, with some enthusiasm, but still suspicious. Paul nodded and was just about to walk out the door when I remembered that Garon, the real Garon was a blues lover and particularly a Peetie Wheatstraw expert. I asked, "Do you have any Peetie Wheatstraw records?" I knew that Peetie's records were rare as hens' teeth. Paul said "Peetie Wheatstraw made 81 records, I've got 78 of them."

So we knew for sure that it was the real Paul Garon and were excited to meet him.⁴⁰

³⁸ An excerpt from the essay is published in *Dancin' in the Streets: Anarchists, IWW's, Surrealists, Situationists & Provos in 1960s*: 386-388. The full essay appears in *Heatwave* 1 (1966).

³⁹ Penelope Rosemont, *Dreams and Everyday Life*, 162.

⁴⁰ Penelope Rosemont, *Dreams and Everyday Life*, 162. Garon would later publish a book with the Charles H. Kerr Company, *The Devil's Son-in-Law*, on Peetie Wheatstraw and his songs, bringing Wheatstraw into the Chicago surrealist trajectory, as Rosemont would later do with Joe Hill. But it is worth noting the role that Wheatstraw's music played here, even in the earliest encounter of the Rosemonts and Garon at Solidarity Bookshop. Wheatstraw's music is inextricably linked to the history of Chicago surrealism.

Garon chuckles softly when I ask him about this story, sitting in the midst of shelves laden with thousands of dusty volumes in the antiquarian bookshop he co-owns in Evanston, Illinois. “They were very suspicious of me,” he smiles, “but then, everybody had a good reason to be suspicious of strangers back in those days.”⁴¹ Meeting Paul today, a tall, soft-spoken, balding gentleman, never without his suspenders, who deals in rare books and blues records, one would never guess that he was ever drawn to rebellion in his work and in his life. Yet amidst myriad spirals into the dark and troubling waters of addiction, Paul Garon managed to single-handedly save Peetie Wheatstraw and Memphis Minnie from oblivion with his anthropological studies of blues history, painting a portrait of the blues as a poetic and spiritual revolt against repression in his excellent, and now legendary, *Blues and the Poetic Spirit*. Garon, though, is ever-quick to point out that his entry into the realm of politics was largely shaped and influenced by Franklin, Penelope, and the other members of the Chicago left-wing beatnik scene. “What drew me there [to Chicago] was the blues scene, not the radical scene,” Paul says, pointing out that his early friendship with the Rosemonts largely formed around their shared love of the forgotten greats of the American blues.⁴² Yet “[w]ith Paul, we would form a dynamic surrealist conspiracy against miserablism,” Penelope wrote in her autobiography—a conspiracy that would last for over four decades. Paul remained Franklin’s near-constant companion right up until the latter’s death in 2009, and even today, Paul and his wife Beth remain a permanent fixture of life at the Rosemont house on Jarvis Avenue, in Chicago’s far north side neighborhood of Rogers Park, helping to manage the new releases of the Charles H. Kerr Company, run out of a basement office in the house.

It was with Paul Garon, in 1968, that Penelope and Franklin would put together the

⁴¹ Paul Garon, personal conversation, February 23, 2010.

⁴² Paul Garon, personal conversation, February 23, 2010.

first issue of the Chicago surrealist journal, *Arsenal*. While “others who had come to the surrealist cause had been pulled in many directions, and it had been difficult to hold a group together,” Paul’s entry into the surrealist milieu would provide the glue to hold together the disparate pieces of poetic revolt in 1960s Chicago.

Other relationships formed throughout the 1960s would contribute to this uncanny constellation of misfits and revolutionary spirits. One of the earliest incarnations of the collective endeavor that would eventually become the Chicago Surrealist Group was the Roosevelt University Anti-Poetry Club, founded by Franklin and an assortment of friends, many of whom would become founders of Solidarity Bookshop.⁴³ The Anti-Poetry Club was not, as the name might imply, against poetry. Its members were, however, against the university’s Poetry Club, a rather officious student organization (according to Franklin) that met regularly to discuss the works of Eliot and other canonical lyricists in the most boring and academic fashion. The Anti-Poetry Club, on the other hand, was a rather raucous bunch of trouble-makers who already embodied the surrealist dictum that poetry is life, and revolt meant to be experienced as a way of life, and not as words measured out upon a page. Franklin, channeling his early Rhapsodist days, opened the first meeting by jumping onto a table and reading one of his own poems at the top of his lungs, and “a delightful chaos ensued.”⁴⁴

Besides bringing Franklin together with Penelope, Robert Green, Bernard Marzalek, Larry De Coster, Tor Faegre, and others who would form the nucleus of Solidarity

⁴³ Solidarity Bookshop had an important role to play in the development of Chicago surrealism. It bears a great resemblance to the “anarchist” or “radical” infoshops of the current day—focusing primarily on left-political literature, frequently on literature not widely available, Solidarity was a collectively-run space that served as a meeting point for the young Marxist/anarchist radicals, as well as a point of encounter with older radicals, especially old-time IWW organizers, interested in seeing what the younger generation was up to. The bookstore, which moved multiple times before eventually closing for good many years later, appears continuously throughout the recollections of the surrealists’ earliest days in Chicago, and serves as the mailing address listed in many of their early publications. One has the sense that Solidarity is, in and of itself, a character in the larger surrealist history in Chicago.

⁴⁴ Ron Sakolsky, “Surrealist Subversion in Chicago,” 32.

Bookshop and, eventually, the first Chicago surrealist group, Roosevelt also brought the budding surrealists into contact with the great black anthropologist St. Clair Drake, whose profound influence on what we now might call Chicago-idea surrealism cannot be discounted. Drake had moved to Chicago from Virginia in the late 1930s to study anthropology at the University of Chicago under the instruction of W. Allison Davis. While a student there, Drake had partnered with the now-famous sociologist Horace R. Cayton on a study of black culture on Chicago's South Side, published in 1945 as *Black Metropolis*.⁴⁵ A pioneer in the subject of anthropology, and one of the very first African Americans to hold a university position in the field, Drake was invited to join the teaching staff at Roosevelt University in 1946, an institution he would later describe as "explicitly dedicated to an active fight against racial discrimination and segregation as well as to academic excellence."⁴⁶ Roosevelt was one of the first universities in the country to develop an African Studies program, which Drake helped to launch there in 1950. He remained on the faculty at Roosevelt until 1968, when he accepted a position as the director of Stanford University's African and Afro-American Studies program.

Franklin was rather fond of telling people that at Roosevelt, he had "majored in St. Clair Drake,"⁴⁷ a sentiment that seems not altogether uncommon amongst the young folks who had the good fortune to study with Drake during those years at Roosevelt. John H. Bracey, Jr., an early member of the Anti-Poetry Club, and a Drake student, who would go on to become a well-respected activist-scholar in the fields of African-American studies and social history, explained how Drake fit in to the emerging movement of black radicalism at

⁴⁵ Chapter 6 of the present work is devoted to an examination of *Black Metropolis* and the impact of urban anthropology on American surrealism.

⁴⁶ George Clement Bond and St. Clair Drake, "A Social Portrait of John Gibbs St. Clair Drake: An American Anthropologist," *American Ethnologist* 15.4 (November 1988): 775.

⁴⁷ Personal conversation, November 3, 2007, but see also Ron Sakolsky, "Surrealist Subversion in Chicago," 36-37.

Roosevelt:

He was at the center of it all. Everybody took his classes, you had to, you took all of his classes, even if you weren't registered for them. When I first got to Roosevelt in my sophomore year, I was filling out my registration form and I ask a friend, "Well what should I take?" And he said, "Well, you gotta take Drake." And I said, "What's Drake?" And then I see this man coming down the hallway, shirt untucked, hair all over, big stack of papers in his arms, and my friend, he says, "That's Drake." So I signed up. People would take his classes again and again, there was this system: if you were registered for the course, you got to sit in a chair. If you weren't registered, you would sit on the floor. There were always people hanging around him, I used to hang out in his office all the time. And he was supportive, you know, if the university came looking for us for something we had done, some protest, you found Drake and he would hide you in his office. And if the school tried to find him to ask him to intervene, like if we occupied the president's office, he would just disappear.⁴⁸

Drake's mentorship shaped the soon-to-be surrealists, and especially Franklin, in two primary ways. First, and importantly, by bringing Franklin and the other early surrealists into contact with the black radical intelligentsia, and into contact with the young radicals who would eventually become the leaders of the struggle for black liberation in the US throughout the 1960s and 1970s (like Max Stanford, John Bracey, James Foreman, and others), Drake ensured that the American surrealist movement would not only carry on the tradition of anti-racist, multi-cultural politics that had also characterized the earliest surrealist endeavors in France, but also expand this tradition, developing a more salient and nuanced critique of "whiteness" over the years that eventually came to define a particular part of the

⁴⁸ John H. Bracey, Jr., personal conversation, July 11, 2009.

worldview that we now associate with Chicago-idea surrealism.⁴⁹ As Bracey would write years later, thinking back on his own encounters with the Chicago group in its earliest stages, modern American surrealism has always been “unselfconsciously multiracial and multicultural,” refusing to choose *any* dominant gender, race, culture, or political ideology as its defining characteristic.⁵⁰ And while Franklin’s interest in African-American culture would help to drive the anti-racist, anti-whiteness politics of the Chicago surrealist group, as would Paul Garon’s critical work on the history of American blues, and the Chicago group’s eventual connection with Noel Ignatiev and George Rawick, both of whom had been deeply influenced by C.L.R. James, this early association with Drake certainly opened the doors for a certain strain of black radicalism to find its way into the movement’s very core.

In the introduction to a 1998 issue of the journal *Race Traitor* devoted entirely to examining surrealism and the critique of whiteness, the Chicago Surrealist Group would write:

For many Europeans and Americans of European descent, being surrealist has been one way of not being white—indeed, a way of actively undermining the white mystique and of sabotaging the repressive machinery that props it up. From the surrealist point of view, traditional anti-racist strategies—education against prejudice;

⁴⁹ The concept of “anti-whiteness” valorized by the surrealists is an interesting one. Although the outlines of the project of “race treason” and multiracialism appear in the context of the Parisian group, the critique of whiteness seems to have entered the world of Chicago surrealism through the work of Noel Ignatiev and his important *Race Traitor* journal, as well as the work of historian David Roediger. Both Ignatiev and Roediger have long-lasting friendships with the Chicago group, and both have collaborated with the Rosemonts on a variety of projects. *Race Traitor*, in fact, devoted two entire issues to surrealism in the service of anti-racism, both guest-edited by Franklin Rosemont and other members of the Chicago group. In this context, “whiteness” refers not necessarily to the color of one’s skin, but to a marker of social status conferred upon an individual by virtue of his or her loyalty to an oppressive social order. As the editors of *Race Traitor* explain, “The white race is a historically constructed social formation. It consists of all those who partake of the privileges of the white skin in this society. Its most wretched members share a status higher, in certain respects, than that of the most exalted persons excluded from it, in return for which they give their support to a system that degrades them. The key to solving the social problems of our age is to abolish the white race, which means no more and no less than abolishing the privileges of the white skin.” See *Race Traitor*, “What We Believe,” <http://racetraitor.org> (accessed 6-14-2013).

⁵⁰ John Bracey, “Letter: Anti-Poetry Club,” *Race Traitor* 11 (Spring 2000); available online at <http://racetraitor.org/letters11.html> (accessed 01-16-2013).

support for civil rights; boycotts; picket lines; etc.—however important, clearly are not enough. The fact that white privilege is an inherently irrational phenomenon is proof that it cannot be overcome by rational means alone. Nothing less than surrealist revolution can abolish whiteness once and for all.⁵¹

Indeed, surrealism would, for the Chicago Group, become a way of *not identifying with* the hegemony of gender, class, or race, but of, instead, rethinking and redefining the history of each along different, and more ethical lines.

The other great influence Drake's early mentorship had on surrealist practice in the Chicago context was, of course, the introduction of anthropology, and specifically of *urban* anthropology, into the movement's theoretical practice. Unlike most other anthropologists at the time, Drake explored factors such as "class domination, colonialism, imperialism, genocide, and social/cultural revolution" in his anthropological research.⁵² Even more than that, though, what Drake did in his work, and in his classes, was bring *culture* into anthropology, encouraging his students to observe different radically different ways of life that might provide a counterpoint to, and potentially a way out of, "the American way of life"⁵³ against which these young radicals were already rebelling. "Drake's conception of urban anthropological fieldwork," best exemplified by *Black Metropolis*, which explored many of the same street corners and neighborhoods the surrealists tended to haunt, suggested to Franklin "a new imaginative approach to workingclass history, focused on culture."⁵⁴ Drake's project in *Black Metropolis* was, as we shall see in a later chapter of the present work, not so

⁵¹ The Chicago Surrealist Group, "Surrealism: Revolution Against Whiteness," *Race Traitor* 9 (Spring 1998): available online at <http://racetrailor.org/surrealismissueintro.html> (accessed 01-16-2013).

⁵² Ron Sakolsky, "Surrealist Subversion in Chicago," 36.

⁵³ The phrase is from "Situation of Surrealism in the U.S.," a statement on the development of American surrealism written by Franklin and Penelope in 1966 at the request of the Paris surrealists, including Breton. The statement appeared in the surrealist journal *L'Archibras* in 1967. Franklin Rosemont and Penelope Rosemont, "Situation of Surrealism in the U.S.," in *The Forecast is Hot*, 1.

⁵⁴ Ron Sakolsky, "Surrealist Subversion in Chicago," 37.

different than that of the surrealists. In later years, the project that would emerge as particular to the work of the Chicago surrealists—especially Franklin Rosemont and Paul Garon—did, indeed, seek to define a new, creative approach to workingclass history, one centered around a kind of *vernacular* history, a history particular to the context in which it was written or, even more, a history developed in, and by, the writing process itself. Vernacular history lies somewhere in between the universal and the particular. Grounded in the experience—the personal history, the trajectory, the network, the connections—of the historian, yet ranging far wider than the limitations of the years of the historian’s life or sphere of influence, surrealist vernacular history was an attempt to sort through, to make intelligible, the jumbled cacophony of people, places, and ideas that worked together to inspire action in any given moment or context. More than simple influences, or uncanny similarities, surrealist vernacular history highlighted the largely obscured, but often unexpectedly concrete links between individuals and ideas separated by vast swathes of time and space, networking them together to form a picture of the world that more often than not placed the surrealists at the center. Like the French surrealists before them, the Chicago group would elevate the arcane, the forgotten, the passed-over people and places in America’s history, reinvesting them with a new significance as the cultural guideposts around which the history of the American working class revolves.

Alongside Drake’s urban anthropology, Franklin’s early interest in and involvement with labor history—and especially with the radical turn-of-the-century union, the Industrial Workers of the World—helped to define the idea of Chicago surrealism as a struggle to reclaim workingclass history in the service of the revolution. After all, “if we don’t know our past,” Penelope told me one evening on a snowy Chicago street corner, “then we really can’t

know our present.”⁵⁵ Surrealists have, from the very beginning, been interested in the project of history, of reclaiming hidden or forgotten objects, practices, ideas, texts, and other artifacts from their relative obscurity, and investing them with a new relevance or significance. And, surrealists have always viewed this project of reclaiming hidden histories as a political project. The Chicago surrealists, however, were the first to invest their political project with a class-based sensibility.

Some of that, of course, has to do with genealogy—most of the Chicago surrealists came from workingclass backgrounds, and some, like Franklin, came from families with a deep appreciation for and investment in the tradition of solidarity unionism and direct action. Some of it has to do with geography; chance may have put the right people in the right place, in 1960s Chicago, but the city itself played a major role in the development of America’s first, and most sustained, homegrown surrealist movement. Indeed, the “Chicago-idea” in “Chicago-idea surrealism”⁵⁶ points toward a much longer tradition of radical action and agitation, specific to the city’s own history and development. As Franklin Rosemont, Penelope Rosemont, and Paul Garon wrote in their introduction to *The Forecast Is Hot!*:

Chicago anarchism during its heyday in the 1880s [was] a movement so innovative that its distinctive program came to be called the “Chicago Idea.” This was the name given to a new kind of revolutionary exuberance, organically linked to the workingclass movement, and which expressed itself not only “politically” but also and above all as a thoroughgoing oppositional culture. Unencumbered by the bureaucratic routine implicit in all economism and reformism, oriented instead toward solidarity and direct action, the “Chicago Idea” posed a down-the-line

⁵⁵ Penelope Rosemont, personal conversation, February 20, 2010.

⁵⁶ This term is one that the surrealists, especially Franklin Rosemont, use to describe themselves throughout their literature. See especially the introduction to *The Forecast Is Hot* for an example of the phrase in action.

negation of the Old Order.⁵⁷

The referent here, of course, is the unique mixture of anarchism and radical unionism at the heart of the 1880s Chicago anarchist milieu—the same unique blend that would fuel the fight for the eight-hour day, and, ultimately, ensure the success of the fight after the bombing at Haymarket Square on May 4, 1886, which left one policeman dead and eight anarchists framed for conspiracy and sentenced to death.⁵⁸ Haymarket was an important moment in American labor history, and it remains an important testament to the fight for workingclass emancipation even today. And, in taking up the mantle of the “Chicago-idea” as a defining principle of surrealist struggle in the United States, the Chicago group cast themselves—and the surrealist revolution in its entirety—as a new chapter in a revolutionary tradition in the United States that had its roots in the Haymarket bombing and the founding of the Industrial Workers of the World, both of which had been significant moments in Chicago’s history. Indeed, as the Rosemonts and Garon write:

It is an idea that blossomed anew more than a few times in the next century, in many and very different ways—in the IWW, for example, founded in Chicago in June 1905, and in the Surrealist Group, founded in Chicago in June 1966.⁵⁹

As is the case in their engagement with black politics, and with Parisian surrealism, the Chicago surrealists’ engagement with the tradition and legacy of the Haymarket anarchists is much more than a convenient cultural appropriation. The Rosemonts, in particular, played an essential role in keeping the legacy alive in the American left—and in the city of Chicago.

⁵⁷ Franklin Rosemont, Penelope Rosemont, and Paul Garon, “Surrealism: The Chicago Idea,” xix.

⁵⁸ On the legacy of Chicago-idea anarchism in the context of the fight for the eight-hour day, see Nathan Fine, *Labor and Farmer Parties in the United States, 1828–1928* (New York: Rand School of Social Science, 1928). As Fine writes, “despite police repression, newspaper incitement to hysteria, and organization of the possessing classes, which followed the throwing of the bomb on May 4, the Chicago wage earners only united their forces and stiffened their resistance. The conservative and radical central bodies..., the socialists and the anarchists, the single taxers and the reformers, the native born ... and the foreign born Germans, Bohemians, and Scandinavians, all got together for the first time on the political field in the summer following the Haymarket affair” (53).

⁵⁹ Franklin Rosemont, Penelope Rosemont, and Paul Garon, “Surrealism: The Chicago Idea,” xix.

Franklin's involvement with the Illinois Labor History society helped to fuel regional interest in the story of the Haymarket martyrs, leading a regular May Day tour of Waldheim Cemetery, where the monument to the martyrs still stands.⁶⁰ In 1986, Franklin, along with historian David Roediger, a frequent contributor to surrealist publications over the years, edited *The Haymarket Scrapbook*, an oversized, overstuffed collection comprised of hundreds of original documents—including speeches, posters, handbills, and other ephemera—drawn from the days surrounding the Haymarket Affair, and dozens of essays from notable historians and authors, including many of the surrealists themselves, demonstrating Haymarket's enduring legacy in Chicago, and around the world. Notably, the *Scrapbook* doesn't attempt to provide a comprehensive history of Haymarket; as Rosemont and Roediger explain in their introduction to the book, other historians have done that work, and quite well. Instead, what they focus on is the culture that grew up around the legacy of Haymarket, "the drama and significance of the Haymarket events."⁶¹ Much of the material, and many of the topics covered in the *Scrapbook* seem almost ephemeral: what's included here are not simply the speeches of the martyrs, nor the statements of the defense attorneys; rather, poems, paintings, and etchings of the riot, the martyrs, and the aftermath grace the facing pages of stories detailing the role of women in the Haymarket events (with a special essay devoted just to the widows of the martyrs), Chicago's place in the history of American Westward expansion, the popular perception of anarchism, and of Haymarket, in the United

⁶⁰ A job passed down through the family, it seems—Franklin's father, Henry P. Rosemont, had been a member of the Labor History Society, and had been a regular participant in the annual May Day celebrations in Chicago. More than that, because of their proximity to the cemetery, which happened to be located in the same Chicago neighborhood where Franklin had grown up, the Rosemonts became the literal caretakers of the monument to the Haymarket martyrs, and the graves of the other anarchists who were laid to rest surrounding the monument. I recall, after one of my own visits to Waldheim, mentioning off-handedly to Penelope that the grave of Voltairine de Cleyre, which is just behind the Haymarket memorial, had become obscured by a somewhat overgrown bush. She stood up, found a pair of hedge-clippers, and said, "I'll trim it back this weekend." Just as one would care for the grave of a parent or other family member, the Rosemonts took on the responsibility of stewardship of the monuments to these great revolutionary figures.

⁶¹ Dave Roediger and Franklin Rosemont, "Preface," in *The Haymarket Scrapbook: Anniversary Edition* (Oakland: AK Press & Charles H. Kerr Company, 2012), 7.

States and abroad, as well as portraits of the martyrs focused around their identity as workers (“Albert R. Parsons, Union Typographer”). The *Scrapbook* is just that: a collaged-together record of a hundred years of cultural references to the Haymarket Affair, ranging across a myriad of contexts, which, when taken as a whole, paints a convincing picture of Haymarket as one of the most important, defining moments in American workingclass history.

Of great interest to the surrealists, and to Franklin in particular, was the history and legacy of the Industrial Workers of the World, the nation’s most radical industrial union, whose founding convention in Chicago in 1905 had a direct link to Chicago-idea anarchism and the legacy of Haymarket, a link strengthened by the persistent public presence of Lucy Parsons, widow of Haymarket martyr Albert Parsons, throughout the union’s earliest years. Franklin’s self-directed studies of labor history and the early American radical and anarchist tradition had eventually pointed in the direction of the IWW, whose “‘free-spirited revolutionary open-endedness,’ as he calls it, together with its emphasis on imagination, creativity and humor, appealed to him at once.”⁶² The IWW differed quite structurally from other labor unions, in that it aimed to be “one big union,” open to all rank-and-file workers, no matter their specific trade. As such, the IWW was the first, and in some cases, the *only* union that offered membership to workers engaged in a specific trade, working in a specific shop, as well as those who moved around from job to job, working when and where work was available: hobos, migrant workers, odd-jobbers, even the unemployed. Even in the 1960s, the IWW still maintained a small presence in Chicago, and when Franklin learned about the union hall still standing at the intersection of Halsted and Fullerton (in what’s now Chicago’s Lincoln Park neighborhood), he immediately went by and joined the union—despite his lack of gainful employment at the time. “Six months later,” as Ron Sakolsky

⁶² Ron Sakolsky, “Surrealist Subversion in Chicago,” 33.

gleefully relates, “he received his organizer’s credentials and began signing up everybody he knew.”⁶³

At Roosevelt University, Franklin helped to start the RU Wobblies⁶⁴—the first student group in the country to affiliate with the IWW’s radical unionism, according to Ron Sakolsky. The group, which had a considerable overlapping membership with the Anti-Poetry Club, was eventually kicked off of campus (“the only group ever suspended in Roosevelt history”) after they hosted an event with anarchist-pacifist poet Joffre Stewart, who burned an American flag at the beginning of his talk, as was his custom. The RU Wobblies took the censorship of Stewart’s work seriously, and turned their expulsion from campus into a free speech fight that captured the attention of the New Left press and the national press, which ultimately resulted in the group’s reinstatement. A few months later, “the Berkeley Free Speech Movement made headlines.”⁶⁵

It may seem like an exaggeration, but the reality is that Franklin Rosemont and the other radicals who would form the nucleus of the Chicago surrealist group, played a major role in the resurgence of interest in the IWW in the ’60s and ’70s. In 1963, Franklin took a semester off from school and hitchhiked and train-hopped his way across the United States, visiting the remaining IWW union halls, and spending countless hours listening to, and documenting, the stories of old-time Wobbly organizers and union members along the way. These conversations often grew into lasting friendships with lengthy correspondences attached, many of which found their way into Franklin’s books over the years, culminating in

⁶³ Ron Sakolsky, “Surrealist Subversion in Chicago,” 33. It’s worth noting that the IWW continues to inspire and organize labor and free speech fights even today. The first decades of the twenty-first century saw a significant resurgence in interest and membership in the union, leading to a series of interesting and largely successful campaigns around precarious workers in the service-industry sector.

⁶⁴ Referring to IWW members as “Wobblies” is a time-honored tradition within the union. Rosemont devotes several pages to the union lore around the origination of the name in his *Joe Hill* book. See Franklin Rosemont, *Joe Hill: The IWW and the Making of a Revolutionary Workingclass Counterculture* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Company, 2003), pp. 249-251.

⁶⁵ Ron Sakolsky, “Surrealist Subversion in Chicago,” 32-33.

his spiraling, 650-page biography of hobo poet and IWW organizer Joe Hill, perhaps the single greatest example of the Chicago surrealist approach to the writing of history, which is discussed at length in the final chapter of this study.

“We recognized the IWW as ‘Joe Hill’s union,’” Franklin wrote, describing the radical climate of 1960s Chicago that led the would-be surrealists to their decision to join the union,

and the direct heir to 1880s “Chicago-idea” anarchism—a fundamentally anti-authoritarian group that left open lots of room for individual and small-group improvisation; the only group in which we could develop our wide-ranging inclinations: to rethink revolutionary theory, to explore the subversive possibilities of popular culture, and above all to pursue our passion for *poetic action*: that is, for *life as adventure*. We knew that IWW perspectives had a place for all of these, and that no other group would tolerate them.⁶⁶

As with Haymarket, Franklin’s interest in the IWW centered largely around the union’s cultural implications. In his studies of the early history of the union, he uncovered the glimmers of a tradition of workingclass culture that he would eventually trace out well into the 21st century—a tradition that included both Joe Hill and Bugs Bunny! At the same time, though, Franklin wasn’t content to simply uncover that history—he wanted to add to it, to redirect the tradition towards a younger, more contemporary set of concerns. A week after the RU Wobblies’ free speech fight ended, Franklin and others⁶⁷ started *The Rebel Worker*, a

⁶⁶ Franklin Rosemont, “To Be Revolutionary in Everything,” 17.

⁶⁷ In “To Be Revolutionary in Everything: The *Rebel Worker* Story, 1964-1968,” Franklin discusses the journal’s founding in detail, naming the other founding members as Torvald Faegre and Robert Green, soon to be joined by Bernard Marszalek, and Penelope Bartik. Tor Faegre was non-violence resistance activist, a carpenter by trade and “an artist by inclination,” who designed the covers and hand-lettering for *The Rebel Worker*. Robert Green was a mechanic/machinist by trade, active in the civil rights movement and the I.W.W.’s renewed organizing activities, he lived just a few blocks from the I.W.W. Hall in Lincoln Park. Bernard Marszalek was a direct action Bakuninist and intellectual who served as the Chicago distributor for Colin Ward’s famed British anarchist newspaper

new IWW periodical devoted explicitly to the intermingling of intergenerational perspectives on solidarity unionism and the revolutionary tradition, with the support of the older members of the Chicago GMB, including the esteemed labor organizer and historian Fred Thompson, who befriended Franklin in his earliest visits to the Chicago union hall, and found the ideas of his younger fellow workers greatly intriguing. Hailed in later years by the surrealists as “Critical theory at its Bugs Bunnyest best!” and “Dialectics in the spirit of the incredible hulk!,”⁶⁸ *The Rebel Worker* printed updates on current union activities and short pieces celebrating long-forgotten people and events in the union’s history alongside essays by André Breton, Benjamin Péret, Leonora Carrington, Cornelius Castoriadis, and many, many other members of the international intelligentsia, as well as essays by the Chicago radicals themselves exploring such topics as “The Jimi Hendrix Experience,” “Humor or Not or Less or Else!,” and “Mods, Rockers, and the Revolution.” The total effect was rather staggering, and the journal, which ran regularly from 1964 until 1968, was a smashing success—so successful, as a matter of fact, that many old-timers in the union credited *The Rebel Worker* crowd with having “doubled and tripled the membership overnight.”⁶⁹

From the beginning, *The Rebel Worker* displayed a deep appreciation for arts and culture in the service of revolutionary politics, characterized not only by its willingness, but its *gleefulness* in printing surrealist narratives side-by-side with eyewitness reports from picket lines across the nation. Yet these conjunctions were more than a simple linking of essays and images from disparate traditions; the editors of *The Rebel Worker*, especially Franklin, were

Anarchy. Marszalek joined the *Rebel Worker* group around the time of the journal’s third issue, though a letter he had written to the group appeared in the second issue. Penelope joined the group in the fall of 1964, and appears as an author in the third issue. For a more comprehensive account, see Franklin Rosemont, “To Be Revolutionary in Everything: The *Rebel Worker* Story, 1964-1968,” pp. 23-24.

⁶⁸ See the cover of Franklin Rosemont & Charles Radcliffe, *Dancin’ in the Streets*.

⁶⁹ Franklin Rosemont, “To Be Revolutionary in Everything,” 25. The statement, of course, is slightly less impressive than it sounds. In 1963, when Franklin joined, the total membership of the union numbered no more than 100. Still, it’s important to recognize the surrealist impulse at work here, in the project of recognizing an important historical organization on the cusp of disappearing into complete obscurity, and the potentially revolutionary importance of reinvesting it with a new, modern, homegrown significance.

particularly gifted at uncovering those individuals in the union's history in whom these disparities already existed. A notable example is the great IWW storyteller T-Bone Slim, "author of 'The Mysteries of a Hobo's Life,' 'The Popular Wobbly,' and 'I'm Too Old to Be a Scab,' songs in the current edition of the Little Red Songbook.... a 'fantastic character' who could hold his listeners spellbound with his rambling stories, raucous word-play, and violent humor."⁷⁰ A lifelong Wobbly, Slim exemplified what Franklin and the other *Rebel Workers* found most compelling in the revolutionary tradition of the union: a strong mixture of humor, folk wisdom, music, of workingclass poetry, and steadfast, non-sectarian revolutionary politics, bolstered by concrete action against all forms of oppression. As Franklin wrote in the first issue of *The Rebel Worker*, which reprinted a series of selections from Slim's writings, "We look upon *The Rebel Worker*, in part at least, as a continuation of the revolutionary spirit which animated the life and work of T-Bone Slim."⁷¹

It's clear, though, that the *Rebel Worker* group also saw themselves as the inheritors of a much longer, larger revolutionary tradition of which the IWW and the surrealists formed a small but important part. By the time the seventh and final issue of *The Rebel Worker* appeared in 1967, not long after Penelope and Franklin had returned from their trip to Paris to meet the surrealists, the journal had greatly expanded, both in size and in scope. Essays and updates from union members, and from members of the Chicago group appeared alongside a variety of other voices, some new and old, including a short essay from André Breton, an important appeal from the American Indian Movement, and the first piece of Situationist theory to be published in English, Jean Garnault's "Elementary Structures of Reification." Though it was not unusual to see Franklin's name amongst the author list, the seventh issue of *Rebel Worker* contained an interesting piece entitled "Vengeance of the Black

⁷⁰ Franklin Rosemont, "Introduction to T-Bone Slim," *The Rebel Worker* 1 (May 1964).

⁷¹ Franklin Rosemont, "Introduction to T-Bone Slim."

Swan: Notes on Poetry and Revolution,” one of the earliest Chicago surrealist declarations, the title a homage to Lautréamont. The essay, which seeks to present the process of poetry (as opposed to the poem itself) as a revolutionary pursuit, to divorce poetry from the literary tradition, so to speak, is important for its clear definition of the surrealist approach to language (discussed in some detail in the following two chapters of the present work), but it is particularly striking when read from the perspective of the surrealist project of reading history against the grain. Consider, for example, the following passage:

The tasks historically handed down to us by Lautréamont, Marx, Engels, Bosch, Fourier, Rimbaud, Sade, Jarry, Dadaism, Charles Fort, Freud, Maturin, the IWW, the surrealists, Shays’ Rebellion of 1786, the Nat Turner Insurrection of 1831, the Paris Commune of 1871, the Russian Revolutions of 1905 and 1917, the Spanish Revolution of 1936, the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, the Enragés, the Durutti Column, Emiliano Zapata, much of contemporary science, the youth revolts and guerilla wars of all generations, and the liberating mythology of desire suggested in *Bugs Bunny*, *Daffy*, *Uncle Scrooge*, *Hulk* and *Spirit* comics, in the Cthulhu Mythos, the blues, the “trickster tales” and *The Rebel Worker* (Numbers 1-7) are being achieved ... by the people in the streets, for whom these questions, though often unconscious and thus theoretically unformulated, are nevertheless in practice a matter of life and death.⁷²

Rosemont’s list is vast and complicated; he would spend the next fifty years illuminating the connections in the progression of important men, moments, and movements that formed the revolutionary tradition within which the Chicago group existed. But even in this earliest attempt to collect and catalog Chicago surrealism’s forerunners, the humor and irreverence

⁷² Franklin Rosemont, “Vengeance of the Black Swan: Notes on Poetry and Revolution,” *Rebel Worker* 7 (December 1966).

that marks surrealist vernacular history is apparent—who else but a surrealist historian could so blithely categorize Bugs Bunny in the same tradition as Nat Turner? Yet Rosemont is serious in his appreciation of Bugs, Daffy, the Hulk, and the other figures from popular culture he would appropriate over the years, arguing in favor of those figures who present a challenge to the cultural values of the American “way of life.” Rosemont’s list is, among other things, a beginning catalog of a series of individuals and events drawn together by their relative success in disrupting the political and cultural hegemony of bourgeois imperialism, celebrating instead, the rise of the working class. We should note here that Rosemont’s “people in the streets” here refers not to mass demonstrations but to the mass of workers going about their everyday lives.

In the years that followed the founding of *The Rebel Worker* and the RU Wobblies, the Chicago surrealists would engage with the history and present day activities of labor organizing around the world again and again. Solidarity Bookshop, founded by Franklin, Tor Faegre, Robert Green, and Bernard Marszalek, opened that same year and presented itself explicitly as an IWW bookshop, serving as a distribution point for union materials, as well as a place for meetings and organizing work to take place. Like most left bookstores, Solidarity was much more than any one label might explain, even if the plaque above the door read “Solidarity Bookshop. Industrial Workers of the World.” As Franklin relates,

Some people called it “the bookshop with the stop-light in the window.” Others zeroed in on “the huge canoe on the ceiling.” Still others remember “the motorcycle in the middle of the floor.” Comic-collecting grade-school kids called it the “Solitary Bookshop.” Jay Lynch, a pioneer of “underground comix,” recalls it as “the hub of hippie activity in Chicago long before there were hippies.” To the cops ... it was always “The Anarchist Bookshop.” What disturbed the FBI the most about the

place, as noted in a report on Bernard's draft status, were the "constant comings and goings of young people of all sexes and races at all hours of the day and night."⁷³

Solidarity played a critical role in 1960s counterculture as a major point of distribution for political literature and revolutionary propaganda, and, as such, was instrumental in forging concrete links between the burgeoning student activist movement in the United States, and the tradition of radical labor organizing that the IWW exemplified. Not content to solely sell what others had produced, the Solidarity crowd set to work writing, designing, and producing scores of pamphlets, stickers, buttons, and other materials that made their way around the country, from one demonstration to another. Perhaps the most ubiquitous of these was the "Make Love Not War" button designed by Penelope in 1965 and distributed by the thousands at the Mothers Day Peace March in May of that year, as well as at later demonstrations in Chicago and New York, and at radical bookstores around the country, thanks to a thriving mail order distribution business. As Penelope recalls,

In March 1965 ... we wanted to do a button. The slogan we thought of first was the old Fellowship of Reconciliation [the interfaith peace movement founded in 1915] slogan "Make Peace, Not War" but it seemed too tame for the 60s. Several of us together at Solidarity Bookshop—myself, Franklin, Bernard Marszalek and Tor Faegre—thought about this and what we came up with finally was "Make Love, Not War".⁷⁴

Though other sixties radicals have laid competing claims to the coining of the phrase, "it was

⁷³ Franklin Rosemont, "To Be Revolutionary in Everything," 28-29.

⁷⁴ "The story behind Make Love, Not War," *Creative Review*, January 31, 2012, available online at <http://www.creativereview.co.uk/cr-blog/2012/january/make-love-not-war> (accessed 08-11-2013).

[the Solidarity crowd] who appear to have done most to popularise its use.”⁷⁵



Franklin and other young Wobs wrote for the union’s official newspaper, *The Industrial Worker*, and Franklin considered talking on the role of editor at one point, though ultimately, squabbles within the union kept him out of the role.⁷⁶ Not only active in the union’s cultural and intellectual life, members of the *Rebel Worker* group, especially Robert Green, played major roles in the reinvigoration of the Agricultural Workers Union No. 110 and the 1964 blueberry pickers strike in Michigan, the first IWW-led strike in decades. And, not forgetting the connection between the IWW and the Chicago-idea anarchism it had grown out of, members of the RU Wobblies founded the Louis Lingg Memorial Chapter of Students for a Democratic Society in 1967, named for the youngest and most militant of the eight Haymarket defendants.

As Franklin would later write, the *Rebel Worker* group, which continued to grow and expand after the first few issues, recognized the importance of the work they were doing:

[W]e saw ourselves as the old-timers told us they saw us: as long-awaited reinforcements coming to the rescue of an embattled revolutionary outpost whose troops had “held the fort” valiantly for years. We regarded the IWW theory ... as fundamentally sound ... [but] we hoped to update and expand the Wobbly critique

⁷⁵ “The story behind Make Love, Not War.” The essay details the other competing claims to the phrase.

⁷⁶ For more on this point, see Franklin’s own account of the union’s internal politics in “To be Revolutionary in Everything,” pp. 48-50.

and methods, and to apply them to a wide range of current problems. Leaflets, strikes, picketlines, and participation in large multi-group demonstrations were all important, in our view, but we wanted to go further: to find new ways of disrupting routine, breaking habits, provoking inspiration, and in other ways helping workers to realize that changing society was not only desirable and necessary but also *possible* and *fun*.⁷⁷

And, ultimately, the unique mixture of surrealist principles with IWW strategy that came to define and sustain the Chicago surrealist group—which formed just two years after the launch of *The Rebel Worker*, with a largely overlapping membership—did just that.

The long-term legacy of this marriage of surrealist sensibilities and revolutionary syndicalism is apparent in the work the Chicago group has done to sustain and enhance the activities of the Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company. Founded in Chicago in 1886 (just weeks before the riot at Haymarket Square) by Charles Hope Kerr, a young Unitarian abolitionist, the Kerr Company is the nation's oldest and, arguably most creative, radical publishing house and, from its very start, had strong ties to the American working class. In its earliest years, largely funded by a “cooperative publishing bonds” program,⁷⁸ Kerr Company would embark on projects like the Pocket Library of Socialism, the so-called “little red books” which sought to popularize both American and European socialist theory. In 1899, Kerr would publish “Socialist Songs,” which included the first English translation of

⁷⁷ Franklin Rosemont, “To Be Revolutionary in Everything,” 48-49.

⁷⁸ Kerr was likely the first publisher to hit upon the idea of a community-supported publishing program—today a mainstay of small radical presses around the world. In Kerr's version, supporters were able to buy a ten-dollar bond (eventually, through monthly installments), and for the duration of the time the share in the company was held, supporters received a wholesale discount on the materials they ordered from the press. Not only did this likely encourage small alternative channels of radical book distribution and disperse financial control over the company through a broad base of supporters, it allowed Kerr Company to raise much-needed capital to fund forthcoming print projects. See John Duda and Kate Khatib, “A Brief History of the Charles H. Kerr Company,” *AREA 10* (Summer 2011), available online at <http://areachicago.org/a-brief-history-of-the-charles-h-kerr-publishing-company/> (accessed 01-19-2013). On this particular issue, I am deeply indebted to my co-author of the aforementioned essay, John Duda, for uncovering this little-known detail about Kerr Company history and making the link to contemporary community-supported publishing.

the working-class anthem, “The Internationale” (translated by Charles H. Kerr himself). In 1900, Kerr began publishing “The Library of Science for Workers,” and in 1901 the company released May Walden’s socialist-feminist book *Socialism and the Home*. As Charles Kerr, himself, put it, the aim of the press was, ultimately, to publish “clear socialism in clear English,” making the new radical class politics as widely accessible as possible.⁷⁹

In the decades that followed, Kerr Company would publish some of the most important radical literature in the English language, including the first complete English translation of Marx’s *Capital*, in addition to works by labor agitators (and IWW members) like Ralph Chaplin, Mary Marcy, William “Big Bill” Haywood, and Mother Jones. Kerr retired from the helm in 1928, turning the reigns over to the Proletarian Party, a small Communist organization headed by Scottish immigrant John Keracher, who taught classes on *Capital* in the back of his Detroit shoe store before moving to Chicago.⁸⁰

The Party continued, if with lesser intensity, Kerr’s legacy in publishing popular, nonsectarian, mass-oriented Marxist literature, including in 1935, the first English edition of Engel’s *Anti-Dühring*, but as organized socialist and communist activity in the United States dwindled in the middle decades of the twentieth century, so too did the activities of the Kerr Company, which had all-but-disappeared by the time the *Rebel Worker* group was becoming active. In the 1970s, however, a number of older Wobblies and labor agitators, including Fred Thompson, Irving Abrams, and Joseph Giganti, recognized the value of the Kerr Company tradition, and repopulated the board. Under the influence of Thompson and the others, the Kerr Company began to delve back into the treasure trove of American labor stories, reissuing some of the company’s greatest hits, including the *Autobiography of Mother*

⁷⁹ See John Duda and Kate Khatib, “A Brief History of the Charles H. Kerr Company.”

⁸⁰ The Proletarian Party was the very first group purged from the newly formed CPUSA in 1919 and played an important role in the sit down strikes of the 1930s that would lead to the emergence of the CIO.

Jones and Paul Lafargue's *The Right to Be Lazy*. Penelope Rosemont, a seasoned printer after her experience working in the SDS print shop, was invited to join the board in the late 1970s, and, in 1983, became the Company's secretary-treasurer. Together, she and Franklin would continue the work of imbuing the Kerr Company with a contemporary relevance that Thompson and the other organizers had begun.

Under the influence of the Rosemonts, the Kerr Company would continue to preserve the history of America's radical agitators and labor activists, with collections like Ben Fletcher's *The Life and Times of a Black Wobbly*, and the collected speeches of Lucy Parsons, but also to reflect the concerns and the excitement of the radicals of the era. Kerr Company was responsible for reprinting some of the most important documents to come out of post-WWII labor radicalism and the New Left, including CLR James' *Facing Reality*, Marty Glaberman's *Punching Out*, and student-activist manifestos *The New Radicals in the Multiversity* and *The Port Huron Statement*. By virtue of the Rosemonts' involvement with the burgeoning radical movement in Chicago, the Kerr Company became one of the central publishing outlets for the new synthesis of radical political agitation and counter-cultural revolt that emerged in the 1960s and permanently reshaped the face of American left politics.

Not content to simply republish the work of others, however, the Rosemonts set to work writing their own histories of America's most important radical figures and movements, and encouraging others in their circles to do the same. Driven by a desire to capture history from below, to cast off the "official" record of how things were that seemed to always focus on the viewpoint of the victors, Franklin, Penelope, and others who had come together in Chicago under the mantle of surrealism, like the Blues historian and musician Paul Garon, would spend the next thirty years writing a new radical history of

America, treating figures like Slim Brundage, Claude McKay, Memphis Minnie, and T-Bone Slim alongside Big Bill Haywood, Lucy Parsons, Mother Jones, and, of course, the great Wobbly bard Joe Hill.

Viewed as a sum total, the work of the Rosemonts and the other Chicago surrealists tell an interesting story of America's history—a history told explicitly from the vantage point of the heroes, sometimes well-known and sometimes not, of the working class, a history that looks quite different than the one we learn at school. And so, while this book is, indeed, about surrealism and the practice and politics of history, it is also about surrealism and America, which is really to say that it is a book about surrealism's own image of America, an image that is, at the same time, cognizant of the contradictions rife within the American "way of life" and of the struggles that define that life for so many and, at the same time, celebratory of a certain workingclass history, filled with its own unsung and (were it not for the surrealists) forgotten heroes and cultural commons that may well define the shape of the nation far better than any roadmap could ever hope to do.

Chapter Two: Surrealism's Critical Epistemology⁸¹

“Generalizations about surrealism based entirely on painters are bound to be misleading,” Penelope Rosemont wrote in the introduction to her 1997 collection *Surrealist Women*, “because surrealism never has been primarily a movement of painters.”⁸² Penelope wasn’t the first surrealist to suggest the same—even in the movement’s earliest days, the value of visual art had raised significant debate and dispute amongst the surrealists—but the Chicago group have been among the most vocal in unequivocally disavowing “art” as surrealism’s primary reason for being. “Contrary to prevalent misdefinitions,” Franklin wrote in 1978, “surrealism is not an aesthetic doctrine, nor a philosophical system, nor a mere literary or artistic school. It is an unrelenting revolt against a civilization that reduces all human aspirations to market values,... universal boredom and misery.”⁸³

For Franklin and Penelope, as well as other contemporary surrealists, the “misdefinition” of surrealism as a school of art was a strategic move by the powers that be to divest the movement of its raw political power, taking the movement off of the streets and relegating it to the walls of museums, galleries, and private collections. Major exhibitions over the last three decades—at the Tate Modern Gallery in London, the Guggenheim and Metropolitan museums in New York, and the Centre Pompidou in Paris, to name just a few—coupled with the hotly debated sale of André Breton’s personal collection and the famed 42 Rue Fontaine flat in 2003—have imbued the movement and its artistic output with

⁸¹ Portions of this chapter, and the following one, appeared in different form in the volume *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World* (New York, Fordham UP, 2006), edited by Hent de Vries and Lawrence Sullivan. I am deeply indebted to Hent de Vries for many of the insights that make up the analysis in these two chapters, especially on Walter Benjamin’s engagement with the surrealist tradition.

⁸² Penelope Rosemont, “All My Names Know Your Leap: Surrealist Women and Their Challenge,” in *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology*, ed. Penelope Rosemont (Austin: U Texas P, 1998), xxix.

⁸³ Franklin Rosemont, “Introduction,” in André Breton, *What Is Surrealism*, ed. Franklin Rosemont (New York: Pathfinder Press, 2004), 21.

significant power as a field of aesthetic inquiry.⁸⁴ The investment of many of the individuals associated most closely with the surrealist movement over the years in questions of visual and aesthetic (as well as literary) practice can and should not be ignored; indeed, much of the movement's critical power is derived from its close, if ultimately antagonistic, relationship with the world of art, and some of the most memorable exhibitions of surrealist art have been organized by the surrealists themselves (including Breton, the Rosemonts, and other members who have been quite vocal on the point of surrealism's not being an art movement). The problem, though, with the surging popularity of surrealist "art" (a dubious term, depending on who you ask)⁸⁵ that developed somewhat inexplicably in the modern art world, and which came to a head with the millennial fever that gripped the Western world in the years just before and after the year 2000, is that it has little to do with the critical and epistemological methodology upon which these paintings, drawings, and objects are based. Conspicuously absent from the walls of museums and galleries are the political declarations, the tracts, the manifestoes—the voluminous programmatic and methodological texts that charted surrealism's course at every step. Indeed, while lauding the surrealists' innovations, these exhibitions, and the subsequent reception of surrealist imagery on the walls of dorm rooms across the United States, have done little more than prematurely historicize a method of political and social praxis that is still in, and more importantly, *of* great use, even today.

⁸⁴ After the death of Elisa Breton, André Breton's third wife, and his companion at the end of his life, exorbitant inheritance taxes imposed by the French government forced Breton's daughter, Aube Elléouët, to sell her father's personal collection of art and artifacts, which had been housed for so long at the legendary flat at 42 Rue Fontaine. The announcement of the sale and the following appeals to the French government by the "Breton committee" requesting the state to turn the collection and the apartment itself into a "Breton Museum," prompted outcries from the surviving members of the Paris Surrealist Group and the Surrealist Movement in the United States. See the manifestos "Surrealism Is Not for Sale!" and "Who Will Embalm the Embalmers?" online at <http://www.surrealistmovement-usa.org> for a more detailed analysis.

⁸⁵ In the third issue of *La Révolution surréaliste*, Pierre Naville would make the bold statement that "[e]verybody knows that there is no *surrealist painting*." Though there was considerable debate on the subject, as Martin Jay points out, even in the essays that would form the basis for Breton's most well-known work on the subject, *Surrealism and Painting*, Breton deplors the "lamentable expedient" of painting. See Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: U California P, 1994), 242-243.

It's of little surprise, then, that the Chicago group explicitly attacks the presupposition of surrealism as a school of art in so much of their own writing on the movement; changing the narrative, redefining surrealism from the perspective of political, rather than aesthetic, engagement is central to the Chicago group's existence *as* surrealists. My goal in this chapter and the next is to take these claims seriously, and, following the lead of the Rosemonts and others, to reconsider surrealism from the perspective of political and historical engagement, rather than the perspective of aesthetic engagement, and, in so doing, to more clearly illuminate the direct resonance between the political project of the Chicago surrealist group, as outlined in the previous chapter, and the foundations of the surrealist movement in Breton's Paris.

From the beginning, surrealism's practical involvement with aesthetics was, like its involvement with so many other traditions, premised more often than not upon the spectacular demise, rather than survival, of art. Hot on the heels of European Dada, surrealism's earliest engagement with art was really a question of anti-art, although the surrealists, unlike the Dadaists, carried this dialectical demise through to its completed end, making a full cycle past the destruction of art, and arriving at a point where something new—a radically new approach to production—arose like a phoenix from the ashes of itself. In a monograph on the minimalist painter Ad Reinhardt—not a surrealist *per se*, but not entirely unsympathetic to surrealist sensibilities—Susan Sontag outlines the movement between art and anti-art in terms tinged with mysticism:

As the activity of the mystic must end in a *via negativa*, a theology of God's absence, a craving for the cloud of unknowingness beyond knowledge and for the silence beyond speech, so art must tend toward anti-art, the elimination of the "subject" ...,

the substitution of chance for intention, and the pursuit of silence.... Therefore, art becomes something to be overthrown. A new element enters in to the art-work and becomes constitutive of it: the appeal (tacit or overt) for its own abolition, and, ultimately of art itself.⁸⁶

This description holds true for surrealism as for minimalism: as a critical practice, surrealism is carefully balanced upon this fine line between art and anti-art, or perhaps more legitimately, between the development of anti-art as a productive strategy and the call for the ultimate overthrow of art, whose limitations were far greater than those of the human imagination.

Were one hard-pressed, then, to establish the fundamental structure of the constellation of artists, authors, thinkers, and ideologues known collectively as the Surrealist Movement, it would not be along the lines of a theory of aesthetics. Surrealism's investigations and interventions into the artistic plane were never really about producing a *style per se*, or a body of work with well-defined boundaries. The very problem with the musealized⁸⁷ reception of surrealism's output is just that: it places the focus on the works themselves, on the product, rather than the practice, when what *mattered* to the surrealists was precisely the route one took to arrive at a certain creative output. Indeed, the experience of creating was far more important than the creation itself. "In short," writes Don LaCoss in his introduction to Michael Löwy's *Morning Star*, "the images, objects, and texts associated with Surrealism—let's say Meret Oppenheim's famous fur-lined teacup or Breton's anti-novel *Nadja*—are merely leftovers of a much more complicated process, the empty wine bottle on the table the morning after a satisfying evening of intense conversation or the

⁸⁶ Susan Sontag, "The Aesthetics of Solitude," in *Studies of Radical Will* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969); quoted in Mike King, "Art and the Postsecular," *Journal of Visual Art Practice* 4.1 (2005), 16.

⁸⁷ On the notion of musealization, see especially Andréas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003); and Mieke Bal, *Double Exposures: The Subject of Cultural Analysis* (London: Routledge, 1996).

footprints left behind in the snow after a passionate midnight dance under a dark sky.”⁸⁸

Surrealism might *best* be described as theory of experience, a critical—and indeed, *political*—epistemology, whose greatest goal is to develop a radically new way of experiencing the everyday world, and of understanding the structure of thought itself. From its self-acknowledged beginnings in France during the dark days of the first world war, to its rebirth in the heated climate of late 1960s activism in the United States, and onwards to its involvement with the international alter-globalization movement, surrealism was, and remains today, one of the most novel attempts to clear a pathway through the “underbrush of delusion and myth,” as Walter Benjamin (following Karl Marx) wrote his *The Arcades Project*, re-enchanting a disenchanted world and giving rise to the possibility of a more spontaneous, joyous experience of everyday life.⁸⁹ What André Breton, Philippe Soupault, Paul Eluard, Louis Aragon, Benjamin Péret, and their fellow adventurers uncovered in their surrealist experiments in the early 1920s was something more than an artistic, or even a rhetorical, approach to the expression of the unconscious. Surrealism is avowedly *not* an attempt at a do-it-yourself theory of psychoanalysis, and neither does it reach outside of reality to grasp at some sinews of the supernatural or the sacred. Basing their project in reality itself, surrealism’s earliest adherents put forth their collective epistemology as purely immanent, seeking not to transcend the boundaries of the human mind, but only to find a new, more authentic way of experiencing the world.

Surrealism, as an organized movement, was “inaugurated by a series of experiments with language” in 1919—the first experiments with automatic writing which André Breton, together with Phillipe Soupault and Louis Aragon, would announce to the world with the

⁸⁸ Don LaCoss, “Introduction: Surrealism and Romantic Anticapitalism,” in Michael Löwy, *Morning Star: Surrealism, Marxism, Anarchism, Situationism, and Utopia* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), viii.

⁸⁹ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1999), [N1, 4].

founding of the journal *Littérature*, and the subsequent publication, in 1920, of *Les Champs Magnétiques* (*The Magnetic Fields*).⁹⁰ From its earliest moments, though, surrealism understood itself to be an emergent *movement*, a community revolving around a shared idea, so to speak, and not simply a poetic, literary tendency, despite the fact that many, if not all, of the earliest surrealists were, indeed, poets, of one form or another. Especially when one looks to the movement's earliest foundational documents, their internal "memos," so to speak, and troubles to try to see surrealism as the surrealists themselves saw it, one quickly begins to understand the "true nature of the surrealist movement," as Maurice Nadeau writes in his *History of Surrealism*.

[Surrealism was] not an association of men of letters patting themselves on the back to insure their success, nor even a school with various theoretical ideas in common, but a collective "organization," a sect of initiates, a *Bund* subject to collective imperatives, whose members are linked by a common discipline.⁹¹

Which is really to say that surrealism was, and is still today, a revolutionary movement. Of course, like any truly revolutionary movement, surrealism has evolved. When it first took shape in the minds of a group of young men and women disgruntled with Dada, with an increasingly nationalist France, with literature, and with the normative limits of representation, gender, and racial equality, we can be sure that political history, black flags, and barricades were not among the first conscious surrealist objectives. Surrealism consciously began to establish itself as a political movement in 1925 when the Rif uprising in

⁹⁰ Franklin Rosemont, "Introduction," in *What Is Surrealism*, 22. For the purposes of this dissertation, I have assumed that the basic facts of surrealism's development in Paris between the world wars are commonly understood, and so have not taken the time to fully outline that trajectory. Certainly there is a great deal to be said about the details of that important period in surrealism's history, but there are ample options for well-documented accounts of the movement's founding—both from within and from outside of the surrealist movement—already available. Of those, Maurice Nadeau's *History of Surrealism*, Franklin Rosemont's extended introduction to *What Is Surrealism?*, and Mark Polizzotti's *Revolution of the Mind* cover the most useful territory for my purposes, though the last of those, it should be noted, is actually a biography of Breton, and not a more straightforward history of the surrealist movement.

⁹¹ Maurice Nadeau, *The History of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Platin, 1987), 104.

Morocco entered the French-controlled territories of the country. The surrealists declared their enthusiastic support in a June 15 statement for the rebel leader, Abdel el Krim—in part out of a desire to shock their more staid literary counterparts, but also out of a deep-seated discomfort with the French colonial regime. Their collective tract, “Revolution Now and Forever” (written a few weeks later by the surrealists, but co-signed by numerous non-surrealist intellectuals and artists), used the war in North Africa as a jumping off point for a larger critique of Eurocentrism and Western civilization as a whole, and an affirmation of where the political sympathies of surrealism truly lay:

We want to proclaim our total detachment from, and in a sense our uncontamination by, the ideas at the basis of a still-real European civilization. . . . we are disgusted by the idea of belonging to a country at all, which is the most bestial and least philosophic of the concepts to which we are all subjected. . . . Wherever Western civilization is dominant, all human contact has disappeared, except contact from which money can be made—payment in hard cash.⁹²

“Revolution Now and Forever” was the first in a long and impressive series of statements issued by the surrealists in support of the rights of the colonized to rise up against their oppressors. And, though the practical (personal) involvement of surrealists in resistance struggles and armed insurrections would only come later in the movement’s development, it was this early tract and the ones that immediately followed it that set the tone for surrealism’s political, social, and racial consciousness. Already in 1925, the surrealists understood their struggle as a global one—there was a continuity between their own “revolution of the mind” and the political revolution in Morocco, an epistemological

⁹² “Revolution Now and Forever!,” cited in F. Rosemont and R. Kelley, *Surrealism: Black, Brown & Beige* (Austin: U Texas P, 2009), 9-10; and Katherine Harmon, *You Are Here: Person Geographies and Other Maps of the Imagination* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004), 118.

continuity that would eventually transform the entirety of the world they lived in, as evidenced by the fascinating “Surrealist Map of the World,” produced for the Belgian magazine *Variétés*, in 1929.⁹³



A subsequent pamphlet entitled “Légitime défense,” written largely by Breton in 1926 as a followup to “Revolution Now and Forever!,” characterized all attacks against colonial oppressors in terms of self-defense while, at the same time, legitimating the surrealists’ own desire to “participate in the political arena without sacrificing [the movement’s] artistic aims or its interest in psychoanalysis.”⁹⁴ “Légitime défense” is a complicated text, and much of it is given over to a critique of and response to the internal politics in which Breton had already become embroiled within the French Communist Party—one has to read between the lines to fully appreciate the anti-colonial sentiment it expressed. Yet this pamphlet, along with “Revolution Now and Forever!,” would set the tone for the surrealists’ later engagement with the politics of anti-colonialism and the

⁹³ David Roediger provides one of the best, and certainly the most convincing analyses of the 1929 map—most likely drawn by painter Yves Tanguy—in his essay “Plotting Against Eurocentrism: The 1929 Surrealist Map of the World,” published in David Roediger, *Colored White: Transcending the Racial Past* (Berkeley: U California P, 2002). Roediger argues that the map must be read as an early identification of the perils of Eurocentrism, and as a explicit attempt to push forward a “nonwhite” alternative. The essay was originally published in the special surrealism issue of the journal *Race Traitor* (1998), mentioned in Chapter 1.

⁹⁴ Jonathan Paul Eburne, *Surrealism and the Art of Crime* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2008), 168.

development of important surrealist cells throughout the former French colonies, especially after World War II;⁹⁵ in fact, it would serve, in 1932, as a jumping off point for the first black surrealist formation, led by a group of students from the French colony of Martinique studying in Paris, who took the name of their group and the journal around which they revolved, from the 1926 pamphlet: *Légitime défense*.

What is more, these earliest integrations of the politics of anti-colonialism, and a sense of solidarity with the oppressed against the oppressor also positioned surrealism as a political movement that represented a significant challenge to the status quo on a very different terrain. Suddenly, the “revolution of the mind,” as Breton had first conceived surrealism’s central and earliest preoccupation was not enough. The entire material transformation of everyday society was at stake, and was necessary for the “surrealist revolution” to take place. After all, as the surrealists wrote in one of their early programmatic internal documents, “[a]dherence to a revolutionary movement of any kind supposes a faith in its possibilities of becoming a reality.”⁹⁶

Gently guided by André Breton’s then-wife Simone Kahn (described by Youki Desnos as “a living encyclopedia” and “the only person in the surrealist milieu in those years who had actually read all of Marx’s *Capital*”⁹⁷), the members of the Surrealist Group turned their attention to Fichte, Hegel, Marx, and later Trotsky and Lenin, bringing them into resonance with Lautréamont and Rimbaud, turning their “revolution of the mind” into a revolution of everyday life,⁹⁸ one that was increasingly indistinguishable from the worldwide

⁹⁵ This is covered in some detail in Chapter 5 of the present work.

⁹⁶ Quoted in Maurice Nadeau, *The History of Surrealism*, 104.

⁹⁷ Penelope Rosemont, “The First Surrealist Women,” in *Surrealist Women*, 4,7.

⁹⁸ The Situationists, whose relationship to the surrealist tradition is complex and fraught, but nonetheless undeniably one of inheritance, would adopt and popularize this notion of the “revolution of everyday life.” See, especially, Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life* (London: Rebel Press, 2001).

struggle for liberation from all repressive structures.⁹⁹

“In a nutshell,” Penelope Rosemont wrote in 1998, “the surrealist argument goes like this:”

If civilization persists on its disastrous path—denying dreams, degrading language, shackling love, destroying nature, perpetuating racism, glorifying authoritarian institutions (family, church, state, patriarchy, military, the so-called free market), and reducing all that exists to the status of disposable commodities—then surely devastation is in store not only for us but for all life on this planet. Effective ways out of the dilemma, however, are accessible to all, and they are poetry, freedom, love, and revolution.¹⁰⁰

Surrealism in the 1920s, then, “focused on the dream, revolution, poetry,” combining these elements with a radical investigation of love and sexuality—two of the most critical elements of life that were, according to surrealist logic, problematically constrained by the church, the patriarchal state, and, of course, by the limits of so-called “decent” society.¹⁰¹ The surrealist investigations of sexuality turned out a remarkable amount of work on the subject of eroticism, which Breton would later define as “the fundamental need for *transgression*,” albeit a transgression which “rejects ... anything in the nature of vulgar suggestiveness,” and which, following Georges Bataille, was defined as an “immediate aspect of inner experience, distinctly opposed to animal sexuality.”¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Breton himself would identify the surrealist engagement with the Rif uprising as a central turning point in the movement’s self-image, pointing towards a shift from an “intuitive” epoch (the “revolution of the mind” period) to a “reasoning” epoch (the “dialectical materialism” period). In all reality, surrealism in its later forms is a blending of the two—Breton’s distinction, which arises from a 1934 speech before the Belgian surrealist group in Brussels, while representative of his then-close relationship with the French Marxist tradition, was ultimately too sharp. See André Breton, “What Is Surrealism?,” in *What Is Surrealism?*, 156-158.

¹⁰⁰ Penelope Rosemont, “All My Names Know Your Leap,” in *Surrealist Women*, xxxiv-xxxv.

¹⁰¹ J. Mundy, “Letters of *Desire*,” in *Surrealism: Desire Unbound*, ed. Jennifer Mundy and Dawn Ades (London: Tate Publishing, 2001), 11.

¹⁰² André Breton, “Introduction to the International Surrealist Exhibition (1959),” Appendix VI in *Investigating Sex: Surrealist Discussions 1928-1932* (London: Verso, 1992), 168-169. The last is a phrase from Georges Bataille

Surrealism was in its earliest years, as Dada had been, explicitly engaged in a project of shocking the world out of the complacency into which it had fallen:

We still live under the reign of logic... But the methods of logic are applied nowadays only to the resolution of problems of secondary interest. The absolute rationalism which is still the fashion does not permit consideration of any facts but those strictly relevant to our experience. Logical ends, on the other hand, escape us. Needless to say that even experience has had limits assigned to it. It revolves in a cage from which it becomes more and more difficult to release it. Even experience is dependent on immediate utility, and common sense is its keeper. Under colour of civilization, under pretext of progress, all that rightly or wrongly may be regarded as fantasy or superstition has been banished from the mind, all uncustomary searching after truth has been proscribed.¹⁰³

Breton and the others welcomed *all* challenges to the logical order of things—whether explicitly political (like the Rif uprising) or not. At the same time, though, even while they desired to bring about a worldwide collective revolt, the surrealists understood that their revolution was one that had to begin with the individual. “As a *living* movement,” Breton stated in 1934, “a movement undergoing a constant process of becoming and, what is more, solidly relying on concrete facts—surrealism has brought together and is still bringing together diverse temperaments individually obeying a variety of dispositions.... [A]dherence is to be considered not as a blind concession to an inert stock of ideas held in common, but as a continuous sequence of acts which, propelling the doer to more or less

quoted by Breton in the introduction to the 1959 EROS Exhibition, which took place at the Galerie Daniel Cordier in Paris.

¹⁰³ André Breton, “What Is Surrealism,” 166. The text is a paraphrase of the first surrealist manifesto, written by Breton in 1924.

distant points, forces him for each fresh start to return to the same starting line.”¹⁰⁴ By zeroing in on issues of personal politics, including sexuality, and by openly discussing sex, love, and eroticism—and later *desire*, an important watchword for the surrealists throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s, as well as for the development of surrealism in the United States—the surrealists rubbed against the grain of traditional French society and, at the same time, implicitly challenged the influx of Soviet-style communism that swept through the French intelligentsia like wildfire in the years after World War I. Russia was, at the time, experiencing a rapid drop in population, due to desperate conditions, skirmishes, and other after-effects of the 1917 revolution; as the population rate dropped, the Soviet line on the liberation of women changed significantly, celebrating notions of motherhood and family instead of emancipation, and encouraging women to fulfill their role in society as the mothers and wives of the next generation of revolutionaries. For Breton, at least, whose relationship with Soviet-style communism would always be a troubled one, such rhetoric was really no different from the patriarchal demands of French nationalism. Surrealism’s aim, according to the surrealists at least, was the *total* destruction of *all* repressive structures—and this included family, as well as church and state.

It would be careless to overlook the fact that the relationship between surrealism and women, both their image and their involvement as individuals within the movement, has always been problematic, however. Despite the fact that over three hundred women actively participated in the development of surrealism over its almost century-long history, the movement has been plagued by accusations of patriarchy, misogyny, fetishization of the female form, and out and out discrimination.¹⁰⁵ One of the more interesting examples of this critique comes from the feminist pioneer (and surrealist contemporary) Simone de Beauvoir;

¹⁰⁴ André Breton, “What Is Surrealism,” 158.

¹⁰⁵ See Penelope Rosemont, “All My Names Know Your Leap,” in *Surrealist Women*, xxxvi.

in her 1949 text *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir writes one of the most hauntingly beautiful descriptions of the revolutionary potential the surrealists invested in the mythic power of the feminine, but reprimands André Breton, and by association the entire surrealist movement, for equating women with poetry, a move which, according to de Beauvoir, played directly into the notion of a feminine “ideal,” thereby reinforcing the limits placed upon women by French society.¹⁰⁶ But if surrealism’s explorations of the feminine form were designed—unintentionally or not—to limit the sphere of action and affect within which women were allowed to move, then the women actually *associated* with the surrealist movement appear to have missed the memo: Mary Low was busy in Spain fighting the revolution, organizing militias, and editing the POUM English-language newspaper; Nancy Cunard was editing her groundbreaking collection *Negro: An Anthology*, which established her as one of the foremost allies and defenders of Black struggles in the first half of the twentieth century; Suzanne Césaire was co-founding the *Tropiques* group in Martinique; Claude Cahun was pushing the limits of the photographic form, at the same time as she was establishing herself as one of surrealism’s most notorious Marxist theorists and pamphleteers; in Prague, Toyen was co-founding the Czech surrealist group; and in the United States, Penelope Rosemont was organizing against the Vietnam War as a member of the SDS National Staff. To believe, as Susan Suleiman does, that “between 1924 and 1933, during the most dynamic and ‘ascendant’ period of the movement, not a single woman was included as an official member,” is to do a great disservice to Mary, Nancy, Suzanne, and Claude, all of whom were active in the movement during the 1920s and 1930s, as were Joyce Mansour, Leonora Carrington, Simone Kahn, and the scores of other surrealist women who have self-proclaimed their own position as movers and shakers of surrealism’s very core through their

¹⁰⁶

See Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 231-237.

sustained participation, innovation, and continuous refusal to accept the suggestion that surrealism might not be for them.¹⁰⁷ “Surrealist activity,” wrote Suzanne Césaire, “[is] the only one capable of liberating humankind by revealing the unconscious, an activity that will help free the peoples of the world as it illuminates the blind myths that have led them up till now.”¹⁰⁸ Indeed, if Breton and his early co-conspirators can be accused of equating women with poetry, we should be careful to note that poetry, for the surrealists, was never a matter of rhyme and meter, of lyricism and beauty, but rather of “an incitement to insubordination and revolt,” as the Argentine poet Carmen Bruna wrote.¹⁰⁹ It’s really no wonder that the women attracted to surrealism as a creative principle were, like the men within the movement, those individuals who were already, deliberately, “out of step with conventional ways and means of literary [and, one might add, political] establishment.”¹¹⁰

A far more interesting approach to the interpretation of the prevalence of the image of the female form in surrealist productions in the first half of the twentieth century—both those by women and by men—is to examine it as a *transgression* of sorts, an attempt to rethink the identity of “woman” that society had put forth as “ideal.” In her “Orbits of the Savage Moon,” art historian Dawn Ades calls attention to the importance of the surrealists’

¹⁰⁷ Susan Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1990), 30.

¹⁰⁸ Suzanne Césaire, “1943: Surrealism and Us,” in *Surrealist Women*, 136.

¹⁰⁹ Carmen Bruna, “Poetry: An Incitement to Revolt,” in *Surrealist Women*, 397. Bruna, herself, spent thirteen years traversing the back roads of her native country, working as a traveling country doctor in the most destitute rural areas of the land.

¹¹⁰ Penelope Rosemont, “A Challenge to the Twenty-First Century,” in *Surrealist Women*, 389. Returning to the earlier question of why surrealism’s reception has been so frequently relegated to the world of art, we might speculate that the insistence of historians and well-intentioned “supporters” of the movement on centering all of surrealism around a few central figures—primarily a collection of artists, with a few poets thrown in for good measure—has taken its toll on the historical memory of surrealism’s women as well as surrealism’s men. The truth of the matter is that the vast majority of the individuals who participated in the surrealist movement over the course of the last century—men, women, queers, and everyone else—have largely been overlooked, forgotten, or simply ignored. Taken in this context, the lack of fanfare around the work of most of surrealism’s women becomes less a sign of gender discrimination, and more a sign of a general want in the political imagination of the twentieth century. In this sense, anthologies like Penelope Rosemont’s *Surrealist Women*, Robin DG Kelley and Franklin Rosemont’s *Surrealism: Black, Brown & Beige*, Ron Sakolsky’s *Surrealist Subversions*, Krzysztof Fijalkowski and Michael Richardson’s *Refusal of the Shadow* and other similar anthologies published in the last twenty years have done an incredible service to surrealism in bringing to light the voices of surrealism’s heretofore hidden adherents.

frequent forays into the realm of a novel sort of feminism and their early investigations of identity politics, but wrongly suggests that “[t]he male Surrealists’ probings of identity implicated women in ways that seem to militate against any independent explorations of their own. The very importance of women in the Surrealist lexicon and of the female body in Surrealist iconography ... threatens to squeeze out any possibility for women in the Surrealist orbit to see themselves as other than the object or complement of male desire.”¹¹¹

Nancy Joyce Peters, on the other hand, suggests that there is something more complex at work in surrealism’s obsession with “woman” than a narrow approach (like the one Ades takes) might suggest at first blush. “It is inescapable,” she writes, “that Woman is the dominant poetic figure in early surrealist painting and poetry.” Some feminist critics “have suggested that an apparent extension of the blessed damsels and *belles dames sans merci* inherited from late romanticism is, in surrealism, just another objectification of women.” For Peters, though:

surrealism’s allegorical Woman goes much further, as her image becomes multiple, ironic, and mythically complex. In fact, the tension between contradictory variants (e.g. Hans Bellmer’s perverse doll and André Breton’s cherished *femme*) destroy mythic boundaries. Connections made and broken produced massive fragmentation,

¹¹¹ Dawn Ades, “Orbits of the Savage Moon: Surrealism and the Representation of the Female Subject in Mexico and Postwar Paris,” in *Mirror Images: Women, Surrealism and Self-Representation*, ed. Whitney Chadwick (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), 107. Ades’ critique is a good example of the way well-meaning feminist historians have misrepresented the actual situation of women within the surrealist movement in recent years. A fellow of the Tate Modern Gallery in London, site of one of the most famously de-politicized Surrealist exhibitions in recent years, and an art historian whose work has primarily focused on Dali and Duchamp, Ades’ scholarship on the subject of women and surrealism seems to be premised here more upon her investigations of the leading male stars of the movement, than any sustained inquiry into the writing and paintings of the women associated with the movement, most of whom receive a cursory glance from Ades, if they appear in her history at all. Too, her critique seems to fail to account for Surrealist activity past the year 1929; while only seven women are reported to have participated in a meaningful way in the group’s activity (and still primarily as the companions of the male surrealists) during the 1920s, as the cold and sobering wave of the Great Depression swept across the West, many of the women heretofore on the fringes of the movement seemed to awaken. At least nineteen women published important volumes of surrealist theory, poetry, or illustrations throughout the 1930s. One really begins to wonder, then, if it really matters that surrealism began as a delirious experiment of a group of young men; it seems obvious that the movement evolved, as did its central concerns and preoccupations, as its membership diversified to include, yes, more women, but also more *members in general*.

until Woman began to recede as a central motif.¹¹²

Peters' insight, not surprisingly, goes right to the heart of the matter. At stake in the early surrealist investigations of female identity was a much larger investigation of the boundaries between radically divergent opposites. Day and night, real and imaginary, self and other, male and female: the surrealists explored these traditional dichotomies in pursuit of what would eventually become (following their investigations of Hegel) a dialectical system, revolving around the tension between diametrically-opposed forces whose boundaries are, for an instant, blurred when the pieces are brought together to form a "sublime point" at which two realities—*equal and opposite*—fundamentally converge.¹¹³

What is at stake here is not an easy realization to come by: surrealism's obsession with femininity was, in part, an attempt to better understand one's own (sometimes male) identity by exploring something almost, but not entirely foreign to oneself. We might consider, for example, the work of the German surrealist Hans Bellmer, whose gallery of beautiful and monstrous dolls and drawings is perhaps the set of surrealist images most frequently associated with allegations of sadism and misogyny. Yet "[h]owever beautiful and monstrous the doll's forms," suggests Jennifer Mundy, "it is difficult to distinguish completely between the sadistic and loving impulses in his work.... Bellmer turned increasingly to exploring the apparently infinite mutability of the female figure. In these [works (specifically Bellmer's sketches)], the figure is emptied of individual significance, and becomes a mirror for an essentially narcissistic desire."¹¹⁴ It is perhaps going too far to identify the impulse in Bellmer's work as entirely narcissistic, but it is undoubtedly the case that it is, to a strong degree, intended to serve as a self-referential investigation.

¹¹² Nancy Joyce Peters, "Women and Surrealism," in *Surrealist Women*, 459.

¹¹³ See Katharine Conley, "Anamorphic Love: The Surrealist Poetry of Desire," in *Desire Unbound*, 101.

¹¹⁴ Jennifer Mundy, "Letters of *Desire*," 41.

One may well argue, as Katy Deepwell does, that surrealism's desire to understand itself in terms of the resolution of the question of "otherness" feeds into an inherently masculinist agenda:¹¹⁵ exploring the "woman" as "Other." Yet to point to this as the fundamental principle behind surrealism's engagement with questions of feminism and female equality, and with related notions of sex and sexuality, eroticism, and, importantly, desire, is not altogether divergent from a similarly masculinist agenda that seeks to minimize the role that women played in surrealism's investigation of sexual politics. It is also to ignore the important investigations into gender and sexuality of female surrealists like Claude Cahun, who also explored the gender binary—from a different, but related perspective—in their personal lives as well as their art practice. Openly gay, and visually androgynous, Cahun's work put forth an explicit challenge to gender norms, starting first by excoriating the image of the feminine ideal in traditional fairy tales in her collection of monologues, *Héroïnes*, and then moving toward a more explicit questioning of the "reality" of gender identity through her series of self-portraits: Claude as dandy, as androgyne, as skinhead, as model, as soldier, and so on.

Thus, if Breton, Soupault, Aragon, Bellmer, and Ernst, among others, began from the premise of "woman as Other," surrealism's female participants were able to embrace these investigations as an opportunity to push the boundaries of what it meant not only to be a woman, but also to be *human*. Indeed, one may truthfully say that the women involved in surrealism had little interest in fighting for universal suffrage, for carrying on the women's war. They were, rather, engaged in a larger struggle; neither poetry nor revolution, for the surrealists, had a gender.

As the composition of the French surrealist group shifted to encompass more

¹¹⁵ See Katy Deepwell, "Restaging the *Mise-en-Scene*," *Women's Art Magazine* 62 (Jan/Feb 1995): 17-19.

women, and as surrealist groups began to develop in other nations, most notably in England, Belgium, Martinique, and the Czech Republic, in the 1930s and 1940s, the prevalence of woman-as-motif faded away and surrealism's investment in questions of eroticism gave way to a more androgynous notion of *desire*,¹¹⁶ which was defined, in the lexicon composed for the 1959 EROS exhibition as a "profound, invincible and generally spontaneous tendency that drives all beings to 'appropriate' for themselves in some way or another an element of the exterior world, indeed another being."¹¹⁷ Desire, for the surrealists, was a revolutionary principle. Sexual liberation played into the notion, certainly, but it wasn't the central issue at stake. If the sexual revolution was to be a part of the surrealist revolution, the same had to be true for atheism, anarchism, and insanity: once again, as we have come to expect from the surrealists, a *total liberation* from repression.

In surrealist terms, desire is really nothing more and nothing less than the unbearable imperative to act. Let us accept, for the sake of argument, that all revolutionary action can be reduced to two tendencies: on the one hand, we have revolution as an intellectual and social project, carried out by those who feel it is their right to act; on the other, we have revolution borne of desperation, an overthrow of the status quo by those who feel that they have *no choice* but to act. Plato, in his *Republic*, hails necessity as the mother of all invention;¹¹⁸ from a surrealist perspective, however, necessity became the mother of all true revolutionary action. Surrealism's revolution was *clearly* a product of an intellectually-driven will to act—despite the desperation of the situation of the Western world in the mid-twentieth century, one

¹¹⁶ It is impossible to say whether this trend toward "desire" as the predominant theme in what the Chicago Group would call the "ethics" of surrealism came about as a *result* of the increased participation of women in the movement, or whether, as the woman-as-motif image gradually faded away into the image of revolutionary desire, more women began to develop an interest in the movement's goings-on. In reality, both notions are probably true. All that one can really say with any degree of certainty is that the shift *did happen*, and it was an important turning point in surrealism's development into a mature principle of revolutionary action.

¹¹⁷ Cited in Jennifer Mundy, "Letters of *Desire*," 11.

¹¹⁸ "[The] true creator is necessity, who is the mother of our invention" (Plato, *The Republic* Book II, 369c).

dares not ignore the fact that surrealism as a creative principle was explored most fully by a group of men and women whose social and, yes, economic situations provided them with the leisure time to read, write, and record their dreams—but in tying the necessity of revolutionary action to a radically-liberated conception of desire, the surrealists came closer than most to a form of systematic revolutionary practice premised upon an individualized, yet, at the same time, *universalizing* notion of necessity.

In actual practice, the distinction above is too limiting, the contrast too stark between intellectual and absolute necessity. Yet it is not insignificant that just a few days after André Breton spoke to a packed auditorium in Port-au-Prince about the spirit of surrealist revolt in 1945, an uprising broke out that led to the overthrow of the Lescot dictatorship.¹¹⁹ Nor is it insignificant that the same theory would inspire a group of student revolutionaries in Chicago in the early 1960s, in the midst of the New Left, who would turn their entire, and not inconsiderable, intellectual and artistic abilities toward the revitalization of surrealist praxis on an entirely new terrain.

It was really with the Chicago Group that surrealism found its longest-lasting revolutionary expression. Franklin and Penelope, along with their fellow Chicago surrealists, understood something crucial about the movement, that “[f]rom one generation to the next,

¹¹⁹ See J. Woolrich’s excellent short essay, “André Breton and the Politics of Surrealism,” available online at <http://www.uplandtrout.co.uk/PoliticsofSurrealism.htm>. Numerous accounts of the story of Breton’s visit to Haiti in 1945 exist, and most are given over to a hyperbolic account of the fiery words of the poet who incited the masses to revolt. In actuality, the story is a bit longer and more involved—but the importance of Breton’s speech should not be discounted. One of the best histories of this interesting moment is to be found in René Depestre’s “André Breton and the Emanicipation of Poetry,” written on the occasion of Breton’s death in 1966. Breton did, indeed, deliver a series of lectures in late 1945 in Port-au-Prince on the topic of surrealist history and revolt; while his words may have gone over the heads of the Haitian officials who attended, it resonated deeply with a group of student revolutionaries including Depestre. The result was a special issue of the journal *La Ruche* (co-founded by Depestre) devoted to Breton and surrealism, as well as to anti-fascist activity around the globe. The issue sparked immediate controversy, and landed the editors in jail. From there, things spiraled, leading first to a student walkout, then a general strike, and eventually culminating in mass demonstrations over the flagging economy and growing dictatorial power of the government, and violent skirmishes with the police that eventually forced then-president Élie Lescot and his cabinet to flee the country. Lescot’s cabinet was replaced by a military junta that proved to be every bit as repressive as their predecessor, but the chain of events beginning with Breton’s speech and ending with Lescot’s flight is fascinating to consider. See René Depestre, *Pour la révolution pour la poésie* (Quebec, QC: Editions Leméac, Inc, 1974): pp. 204-213.

surrealism's historic specificity [had] been exemplified in its organic and dialectical relationship to the various movements for revolutionary social transformation.”¹²⁰ It simply made sense, as Franklin pointed out, time and again, that surrealism in the climate of late-'60s America would engage with a new set of concerns drawn from the community in which it developed. How, precisely, the surrealists *understood* that community is what is explored in various ways throughout this book. For the moment, it suffices to say that the Chicago group brought surrealism squarely into the center of sixties radicalism in the United States, encouraging their fellow students to “Make Love, Not War” while studying and re-theorizing the texts of the Paris movement with the help of Breton and the other remaining members of the group, and using surrealism's revolutionary power to forge direct links between the women's liberation movement, the student activities coalition, the civil rights struggle, and the resurgence of youthful interest in the labor movement. And, at the center of it all, was the surrealists' radical concept of desire.

The writers, artists, printers, musicians, and revolutionaries associated with the Chicago Surrealist Group and the Surrealist Movement in the United States (as the group was renamed when it became clear that surrealism had caught on all across the country, and as the core Chicago group began to settle in different cities across the country) have produced some of the most theoretically rigorous explications of surrealist theory and criticism to date. Although Toyen had already written about surrealism as an “ethical community” in 1955, it was Penelope Rosemont (a chemist before she was a surrealist) who brought the works of Spinoza concretely into the surrealist world and fully explicated a notion of the *ethics of desire*. “Following Spinoza and the poets,” she wrote,

via Freud, the basic principle of surrealism's revolutionary ethic is desire.... Freeing

¹²⁰ Franklin Rosemont, Penelope Rosemont, and Paul Garon, “Surrealism: The Chicago Idea,” in *The Forecast Is Hot*, xiii.

the imagination is the heart of the process by which everyday life becomes the realization of poetry itself. To effect this liberation, to overcome the repressive apparatus of logic, common sense, faith, law, bureaucracy, obedience to authority, militarism, and all the closed systems, surrealism has always proceeded by “multiplying the ways of reaching the most profound levels of the mental personality” [the phrase is Breton’s]. The surrealist revolution draws freely on the most powerful elixirs in desire’s laboratory: mad love, psychic automatism, analogy, chance, humor, play, games, and all forms of free association.¹²¹

The “ethics of desire” draws a great deal from the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud, whose work Breton and others had lauded early on in the movement’s development as something of a logical next step on the path toward their greater understanding of the revolutionary potential of desire, which already included in its arsenal of theoretical influences the mechanistic worldview of the French physician Julian La Mettrie, and the highly eroticized stories of the Marquis de Sade.¹²² Freud himself seemed rather unsure of how to respond to the enthusiastic congratulations and declarations of solidarity from the group of young Frenchmen, and his responses to the group were lukewarm at best. Breton, however, remained convinced that the psychoanalyst’s description of the “unbound” energy stored up within the psyche in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* spoke directly to the questions that the surrealists had already begun to ask about the conscious and unconscious impulses that compelled the individual to act. That Freud, as a thinker of desire, was the first one to actually posit the concept as a psychophysical phenomenon greatly interested the young surrealists; it was, in all actuality, this sort of a psychophysical analysis of desire that formed

¹²¹ Penelope Rosemont, “All My Names Know Your Leap,” xxxv.

¹²² See Jennifer Mundy’s “Letters of *Desire*,” p. 26, for a more detailed discussion of the surrealist trajectory into desire.

the basis of the project that would underpin Surrealist praxis from the 1930s onward: an ever-expanding attempt to discover new ways to productively focus the explosive potential contained within human desire.

In Chicago, in the 1960s, when hostilities toward Freud were running rampant through the American Left, the Chicago Group took the surrealist version of psychoanalytic critique one step further. Reading Freud's own comment that therapy was "not the most important aspect" of his psychoanalytic theory against the grain, the Rosemonts, along with Paul Garon, whose deep and abiding in psychoanalysis played a central role in bringing a certain Freudian (and later Marcusean) element into the revolutionary ethics of the Chicago group, "elaborated a critique that focused on the expanding horizons of revolutionary self-activity. Rejecting the vulgar-Marxist denial of internal reality and the Jungian fetishization of a pseudo-unconscious," they wrote, "our aim has always been to resolve the contradictions between conscious and unconscious, subjective and objective—in short to break through the psychical and social obstacles separating desire from action."¹²³

Surrealism does, of course, diverge from the Freudian—and later Lacanian—picture of desire, both of which are premised around a fundamental *lack*, making desire an inherently *negative* principle, relegating human subjects to a life of continual struggle without the real possibility of ever actually attaining the impossible object of their desire. Surrealism, on the other hand, which has always had within it strong utopian impulses,¹²⁴ refused to

¹²³ Franklin Rosemont, Penelope Rosemont, and Paul Garon, "Surrealism: The Chicago Idea," in *The Forecast Is Hot*, xxii. The indebtedness of the Chicago surrealists to the work of Herbert Marcuse is quite great. Marcuse had long expressed an interest in surrealism, and had written about works by Breton and Péret in passing. The Chicago group had read Marcuse's work with interest and had struck up a correspondence on questions of art and revolution with the great philosopher in 1971, some portions of which were published in *Arsenal* 4. The surrealists and Marcuse met in person only once—at the Telos conference held in Buffalo, NY in 1971. (Personal conversation with Penelope Rosemont, February 21, 2010).

¹²⁴ Both Breton and Franklin Rosemont would write long treatises on Fourier, taking up Fourier's utopian community, the phalanstery, as a central preoccupation, and celebrating Fourier's remarkable ability to envision a society so completely unfettered by everyday reality. Other surrealists would also find much to admire in the works of Fourier, as would Walter Benjamin, whose interest in surrealism is documented in the following two chapters of the

accept desire as a negative principle, preferring instead to present desire as active and continuously evolving. Marcel Duchamp had once claimed that eroticism was the only universally understood “ism”;¹²⁵ it was no doubt this universalizing quality that drew the surrealists to the principle of desire as a revolutionary code of ethics. If desire was inextricably bound up with the individual psyche and its own unique history, it was also something that linked human minds and bodies together, as possible objects and subjects of (sometimes sexual) desire, but also as participants in a shared experience of emotional necessity in everyday life. The simultaneously individual and universal quality of desire is precisely what made it an ideal point around which to organize a new ethical program for a revolutionary community. Desire was the great leveler; it brought each individual onto a level playing field of shared experience. No single desire was better, or more legitimate, than any other; what counted was the way that the individual was able to interact with his or her own desire, how well they were able to translate desire into revolutionary action. On a purely utopian level, one might go so far as to suggest that the early surrealists must have believed that the central desire of all oppressed people was the desire for total liberation, the one principle that would unite individuals worldwide in the struggle for a better world.

“In a society divided against itself,” the Chicago surrealists wrote in 1996, “only those who strive to make themselves anachronistic [or, in Breton’s terms, *transgressive*] can solve the riddle of history. Only those who are truly out of step with the times *and who know the reason why* are truly contemporary. The resolution of such contradictions is what surrealism is all about.”¹²⁶

present work.

¹²⁵ See Jennifer Mundy, “Letters of *Desire*,” 28.

¹²⁶ Franklin Rosemont, Penelope Rosemont, and Paul Garon, “Surrealism: The Chicago Idea,” xxix.

Chapter Three: Automatic Theologies, Profane Illuminations

“The Surrealist intervention on the poetic plane,” Franklin Rosemont wrote in 1973, consists of short-circuiting the whole gamut of rationalizations (aesthetic, moral, etc.) to express the real functioning of thought, thereby liberating images of concrete irrationality in poetry that escapes the clutches of realistic appearances, breaks through the meshes of everyday action and, breathing the flames of inspiration and revolt in all directions at once, calls for and prepares the dictatorship of the imagination.¹²⁷

In attempting to bring together the figures of the actual and the possible, the equal and the opposite, not just on a rhetorical level, but to actually bring the imaginary to bear on everyday reality in a way that is both spontaneous and productive, surrealism makes a move that is not without glimmers of a covertly—but *entirely* non-religious—theological project, albeit one which is intimately bound to the overtly political project of establishing at least some small piece of utopia in everyday life. The not-quite-divine “state of grace” that Breton saw as the goal of surrealist practice might best be defined as the point at which the equilibrium between diametric opposites reigns supreme: “Here at last ... the world of nature and things makes direct contact with the human being who is again in the fullest sense spontaneous and natural. Here at last is the true communion and the true knowledge, chance mastered and recognized, the mystery now a friend, and helpful.”¹²⁸

The surrealist politics of equality, then, is wholly dependent upon a notion of communicability that transcends all human boundaries while, at the same time, allowing the

¹²⁷ Franklin Rosemont, “The Crisis of the Imagination,” *Arsenal 2: Surrealist Subversions* (Chicago: Black Swan Press, 1973), 14.

¹²⁸ Suzanne Césaire quoted in Penelope Rosemont, “All My Names Know Your Leap,” lii.

distinctions between concepts—and individuals—to continue to exist, albeit in a somewhat more fluid fashion. This transition between concepts, between the opposing forces of real and imaginary, profane and sacred, disenchanted and reenchanted, and so on was the key element of surrealist thought that made the movement's central concerns so attractive to thinkers like Walter Benjamin, whose interest in and influence on surrealism is of central importance for this study, and who also had a stake in the development of a more radical political epistemology—again a reminder that surrealism was, first and foremost, a political project.

Surrealism's true great achievement, according to André Breton, was to have proclaimed that

humans are completely equal in relation to the subliminal message [the pseudo-Freudian notion of desire as a revolutionary practice] and to have maintained constantly that this message is a common heritage of which we have only to claim our share, and which must, at all costs soon cease to be seen as the preserve of the few. Every man and every woman deserves the personal conviction that they, themselves, can, by right, have recourse at will to this language which is not in any way supernatural, and is the vehicle, for each and every one of us, of revelation.¹²⁹

Breton's reliance upon the traditional lexicon of theological discourse in this passage, as well as in a myriad of others, is interesting. Did Breton truly see the surrealist experience of the world as a wholly material, entirely earthly experience counterpart to the divine mysticism at the heart of religious transcendence? Or, in using the language of divination, but turning it on its head, was Breton simply making a scandalous challenge to the religious tradition against which he, and so many other post-war French intellectuals, rebelled? One needs to

¹²⁹ André Breton, "The Automatic Message," trans. A. Melville, in *The Automatic Message* (London: Atlas Press, 1997), 26.

tread carefully here, since, as Anne Olsen suggested in 2001, there is nothing “sacred” in surrealism. The *Marvelous*, that great surrealist watchword, “expresses all that is beautiful, passionate, and liberating according to each individual’s imagination ... [while] what is deemed ‘sacred’ is sanctified and imposed upon us.”¹³⁰

Present from surrealism’s very inception is, indeed, a call for rebellion against authoritative structures, against Churches and States, and, ultimately, against the very concept of *any* singularity—gods, sovereigns, and victors alike—incarnated as a higher power. Yet, at the same time, the central objective of surrealist practice—no less than the *total reenchantment of the world*—has never been entirely devoid of spiritual tendencies, and should be understood as an attempt to read traditional religious practice against the grain of the divine. We must be wary of, and attentive to the emergence of theological language in the context of a movement whose intent from the very start was the total destruction of all repressive systems, of which church and state were the most pressing manifestations; a movement that declared war on the Pope in 1925; a movement that, after more than seventy years of unceasing critical practice, has never once backed down from its position of scathing theological critique because of the belief that, following Marx, “the criticism of religion is the prerequisite of all criticism.”¹³¹ Even as late as 2001, in the wake of the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center buildings in New York and the “God Bless America” laden response that followed, American surrealist Don LaCoss would write: “God is a hallucinatory projection of humankind’s own misery, fear, and loathing ... refracted back onto ourselves, and incorporated into our individual psyches as well as the

¹³⁰ Anne Olsen, “The Marvelous and the Sacred,” in *Surrealist Subversions*, 368.

¹³¹ Karl Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. R. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978).

larger society.”¹³² At the same time, however, their position as some of the foremost critics of organized religion did not stop the surrealists from mining the rhetoric of traditional religious discourse for useful tools, taking bits and pieces and investing them with new significance outside of the archaic language of heaven and hell, forging direct links between such lofty concepts as “revelation” and “sacred,” and the concrete understanding of objects in the everyday world. Indeed, theology is just one of the realms of discourse where the surrealist strategy of appropriation and recontextualization makes a significant impact; however, for the purposes of the present study, it provides an interesting starting point from which to consider the larger surrealist political project.

Thinking back upon the historical context in which surrealism emerged in France in the shadow of the first world war, this seemingly irreconcilable aversion to, and simultaneous incorporation of, theological categories (and associated, if differentiated, categories of spiritualism and the occult) makes sense. Like Walter Benjamin and other thinkers in post-World War One Europe, the surrealists, in the movement’s earliest incarnation, were fighting against the Enlightenment context of life lived by virtue of reason alone. Desperately wanting to shed both the logical and *theological* baggage of eras past that weighted down all post-Enlightenment European critical and artistic practice, surrealism’s earliest pioneers envisioned a world in which language was flexible enough to allow any and all concepts—theological and otherwise—to be violently ripped from their places within the traditional historical trajectory. Old notions were invested with an entirely new significance as they were recast amongst the myriad surrealist theories of knowledge and experience; *chance* replaced *reason* as the guiding logic of historical interpretation, and old binaries like

¹³² LaCoss continues: “Since nightmarish events known to all as “9-11,” those of us living in the U.S. have witnessed ... startling moments of seamless overlap between the work of the external engines of authoritarianism and the internalized ones. It is no wonder, therefore, that the ubiquity of God on our cultural radars should coincide with the monolithic consolidation of police powers by the nascent National Security State” (Don LaCoss, “9-11 and the Theology of Terror,” in *Surrealist Subversions*, 371).

“sacred” and “profane” became stand-ins for largely the same categories of experience. One cannot simply disavow all of logic for fear of ending up mired in religion. Yet one could not completely disavow spirituality either, since the allowance of otherwise unexplained phenomena provided an important counter-point to the crushing logic of Enlightenment reason. The best strategy, the surrealists learned, turned out to be one in which elements of each were brought to bear on the others, an approach to the world that was, at the same time, both logical and miraculous, neither wholly one nor the other, constantly shifting and changing to incorporate new and old ideas and objects as they made themselves visible and understandable.

As Walter Benjamin wrote in 1929,

[A]nyone who has perceived that the writings of [the surrealist circle] are not literature but something else—demonstrations, watchwords, documents, bluffs, forgeries if you will, but at any rate, not literature, will also know, for the same reason, that the writings are concerned literally with experiences, not with theories and still less with phantasms.¹³³

Benjamin was, in fact, one of the first—perhaps *only*—European thinkers to recognize the philosophical and, indeed, *revolutionary* importance of surrealist praxis, discovering in the movement’s earliest texts a welcome antidote to the epistemological disenchantment that plagued the neo-Kantian paradigm against which he struggled his entire career. As we shall see, surrealism played an integral role in Benjamin’s later philosophy, providing an unexpected, but ideal, bridge between his early messianic theory and his later materialist writings, although, it should be noted, Benjamin would remain highly influenced by theology

¹³³ Walter Benjamin, “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia,” trans. Edmund Jephcott, in *Selected Writings Volume 2: 1927-1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999): 208.

throughout his career, while surrealism moved in an opposite direction as the movement progressed. For Benjamin, surrealism provided a key set of critical strategies that could fill the gap between mystic and Marxist theories, a gap that had to be bridged if his philosophical approach was ever to overcome the “temporally-limited” Kantian epistemology that was unable to move past its own time, remaining forever mired in the “religious and historical blindness of the Enlightenment.”¹³⁴ Surrealism, in placing critical weight on the collection of individual experiences that, together, and in communication with each other, made up a shared body of knowledge and historical understanding of the present moment was, according to, Benjamin the most radical expression of human freedom that had graced European thought “since Bakunin.”¹³⁵ A lofty analysis, but one that André Breton would unknowingly echo that same year when he explicitly tied surrealism to the class struggle in his Second Manifesto of Surrealism, written in 1929:

[I]t is up to us to move, as slowly as is necessary, without any sudden fits or starts, toward the worker’s way of thinking, by definition little inclined to follow us in a series of undertakings which the revolutionary concern for the class struggle does not, ultimately, imply. We are the first to deplore the fact that the only interesting segment of society is systematically kept in ignorance of what the head of the other is doing.... Our fondest desire is to keep within reach of these people a nucleus of ideas which we ourselves found astounding, meanwhile being careful to keep the communication of these ideas from becoming an end rather than remaining the means that it should be, since the end must be the total elimination of the claims of a class to which we belong in spite of ourselves and which we cannot help abolish

¹³⁴ Walter Benjamin, “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy,” trans. Rodney Livingstone, in *Selected Writings Volume 1: 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1996): 101.

¹³⁵ Walter Benjamin, “Surrealism,” 215.

outside of ourselves as long as we have not succeeded in abolishing them within ourselves.¹³⁶

Benjamin's identification of surrealism with Bakunin was more prescient than the surrealists themselves might have realized at the time (though there is no indication that they read Benjamin's essay at the time it was originally written). In later years, surrealists around the globe would move much closer to anarchism than Marxism—and Breton, himself, wrote in 1952 that, “it was in the black mirror of anarchism that surrealism first recognized itself.”¹³⁷ Surrealism's anarchistic impulse would be put to great use by the Chicago surrealists and the later American militant-surrealist formations that appeared in the last decade of the twentieth century in the context of the anti-globalization movement (whose own relationship to anarchism is an interesting one), and it is certainly within certain strains of contemporary anarchist practice that the work of the Chicago surrealists has had a profound influence; an extensive investigation of surrealist anarchism (or anarcho-surrealism, as Ron Sakolsky has called it) is, however, outside the scope of the present study. What *is* worth noting is the fact that, even in 1929, when surrealism's involvement with organized French Marxism was at its strongest, and multiple members of the surrealist group numbered among the membership of the French Communist Party (*Parti communiste français*, PCF),¹³⁸ Breton remained adamant that the social struggle was only a part of the total revolutionary picture:

¹³⁶ André Breton, “Second Manifesto of Surrealism,” 132.

¹³⁷ André Breton, writing in the French anarchist journal *Le Libertaire* (January 11, 1952), cited in Mark Antliff, “Review of *Surrealism and the Politics of Eros*,” *H-France Review* 6.63 (May 2006), available online at <http://www.h-france.net/vol6reviews/antliff.html> (accessed 1-27-2013).

¹³⁸ The history of the surrealist relationship to the Communist Party is fraught with tensions between party orthodoxy and a move open revolutionary spirit (more anarchist than Marxist) that Breton favored. Party officials called upon Breton repeatedly to disavow his loyalty to surrealism in favor of Communism, but Breton continued to insist that the two were not mutually exclusive, but rather complimentary. This came to a head, however, when Louis Aragon and Georges Sadoul travelled to Russia where they participated in the Karkov Conference; as the story goes, two days before their return to Paris, Sadoul and Aragon were asked to sign a letter to the International Writers' Union in which they “denounced idealism, Freudianism, and Trotskyism as a form of idealism, and in which, finally [they proclaimed their] adherence to the ‘general line.’” Breton, of course, was livid when Aragon and Sadoul returned to Paris and claimed they were “forced” to sign the letter. See Maurice Nadeau, *The History of Surrealism*, pp. 177-178.

The problem of social action, I would like to repeat and to stress this point, is only one of the forms of a more general problem which Surrealism set out to deal with, and that is *the problem of human expression in all its forms....* It should therefore come as no surprise to anyone to see Surrealism almost exclusively concerned with the question of language at first, not should it surprise anyone to see it return to language, after some foray into another area.¹³⁹

Given this, it shouldn't be too difficult to see how Benjamin would find in Surrealism the key to the transition between the mystical, the metaphysical, and the materialist approaches to epistemology and historiography that he, himself, hoped to reconcile. Like the surrealists, Benjamin's writings are shot through with the generative tension of paradox, and it is in the clash of seemingly irreconcilable opposites—for the surrealists, reality and *surreality*; for Benjamin, mysticism and Marxism—that his work finds its most productive moments. "The freedom to move into conjunction things and thoughts that are considered incompatible" is the central locus for Benjamin, who was quick to point out that "my life, as well as my work, moves in extreme positions."¹⁴⁰ Indeed, Benjamin's commitment to the exclusive study of *anything*, though often promised, and frequently to friends who attempted to secure funds to support his various scholarly endeavours, never fully manifested itself. Yet each of these excursions left their mark on his work, alternately downplayed or accentuated as need or context required. In 1931, two years after his "Surrealism" essay, for example, Benjamin would write to the Swiss literary critic Max Rychner, "I have never been able to do research and think in any sense other than, if you will, a theological one, namely in accord with the Talmudic teaching about the forty-nine

¹³⁹ André Breton, "Second Manifesto of Surrealism," 151.

¹⁴⁰ John McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993): 21.

levels of meaning in every passage of the Torah.”¹⁴¹ The letter from which this quote is drawn, which had been, in part, written in response to a comparison of his work with that of Bernhard von Brentano,¹⁴² contains one of Benjamin’s most explicit rejections of the sort of bourgeois scholarship he accuses both Kant and Heidegger of in other essays. While in part a defense of the development of his own form of materialist historiography, a project that was well underway by 1931, and which would find its culmination in his massive *Arcades Project*, to which we will turn in a following chapter, the letter endeavours to define (perhaps for Benjamin himself) his obsession with questions of historical “truth” and centers his thought around “those subjects into which truth appears to have been most densely packed.”¹⁴³ Benjamin’s writing—again like the surrealists—is constantly filled with allusions to compressed systems of levels and hierarchies that must be illuminated, expanded, and ultimately broken down. No object of study was simple, for Benjamin, or, perhaps more accurately, no object in the world was non-complex, or without hidden levels of meaning that were there to be discovered and redeemed. Layers had to be broken apart and defined to get at any real “truth” that might be contained within them, and while Benjamin attributes his approach to materialism to the study of the Torah, he always draws equally from those surrealist endeavors that seek to find in every object an alternate (or several alternate) meaning(s).

From his earliest investigations into the philosophy of language and epistemology, Benjamin brought dialectical opposites to bear on each other in his theoretical methodology, using this theological and mystical research as a framework from which to launch his own radical philosophical ideas as a counter-system to the rampant Neo-Kantianism that swept

¹⁴¹ Gershom Scholem and Theodor Adorno, eds., *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin: 1910-1940*, trans. M.R. Jacobson and E.M. Jacobson (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1994): 372.

¹⁴² Brentano was a well-known left-wing journalist who, along with Berthold Brecht and Herbert Ihering, worked with Benjamin on the outlines for a journal called *Crisis and Critique*.

¹⁴³ Gershom Scholem and Theodor Adorno, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, 372.

through the German university system in the early twentieth century. As a student in Berlin, Benjamin was acquainted with both the Marburg and Heidelberg schools of neo-Kantianism, having attended lectures by both Heinrich Rickert and Hermann Cohen (and having undertaken a massive study of the latter's *Kant's Theorie der Erfahrung* while finishing his doctorate at the University of Bern in Switzerland), but developed a strong dislike for both.¹⁴⁴ While he found Kant's typology methodologically instructive, he criticized the Kantian epistemology for its "blindness to the transient or historically defined character of the mechanistic, indeed empirical, notion of experience upon which it rested."¹⁴⁵ It was precisely this sort of rationalist, empiricist interpretation of experience—precisely what he found so irritating the work of Hermann Cohen—that Benjamin had no use for; he wanted, instead, to replace the Kantian definition of experience with one that was "deeper and more metaphysically fulfilled," which would, at the same time, be objective (based on a transcendental consciousness) and historical (in the sense of a timeless truth). This radically new concept of experience is set forth in his 1917 essay, "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy."

"On the Program" is a particularly interesting essay within the larger scope of Benjamin's *oeuvre*, for it lays the groundwork for the complex metaphysical combination of history, language, and theology that one finds in the *Arcades Project*. Unpublished in Benjamin's lifetime, the essay is, in part, a response to Kant's own investigations into the history of philosophy (in particular "Ideas for a Universal History" and "Perpetual Peace") and the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, and it lays bare Benjamin's growing

¹⁴⁴ In later years, Benjamin would describe himself as a student of Rickert, specifically in response to Theodor Adorno. No doubt he eventually felt some gratitude for this early introduction to the Kantian system in opposition to which he would eventually base so much of his thought. However, as early as 1916, he had clear his distaste for Rickert's style of philosophy.

¹⁴⁵ Beatrice Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin's Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings and Angels* (Berkeley: U California P, 2000), 28. Hanssen's book provides an excellent extended discussion of Benjamin's rejection of Kantian principles. See also Michael Jennings, *Dialectical Images* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1987).

disillusionment with the Kantian program of knowledge.¹⁴⁶ He accuses Kant of remaining mired within an Enlightenment-bound *Weltanschauung*, concerned with “a reality of a low, perhaps the lowest, order,”¹⁴⁷ going so far as to label it “mythological” in its insistence upon a concept of experience completely removed from contact with the absolute. Instead, Benjamin’s own alternate approach to the philosophy of knowledge would establish a “pure and systematic continuum of experience,” dependent upon a search for regulative religious—or historical—truth, a conception of knowledge which could only be accomplished by “relating knowledge to the philosophy of language.... A concept of knowledge acquired by reflection on its linguistic essence will create a correspondent concept of experience, that will also encompass the domains whose true systematic arrangement Kant has failed to grasp.”¹⁴⁸ What Benjamin hoped to mold out of the Kantian system was a *total theory of knowledge*, one that could account for “the uniform and continuous multiplicity of knowledge,” and which would “do justice to a higher experience.”¹⁴⁹ Though the higher experience Benjamin had in mind in 1917 was, we can be fairly certain, a *religious* sort of experience, the fact of the matter is that this definition would soften and expand over time to encompass not just religion, but also art—in particular, poetry—and revolution. Benjamin sensed that there was an essential relationship between the science of knowledge and the higher experience he sought to encompass in his coming philosophy. “A philosophy that does not include the possibility of soothsaying from *coffee grounds*,” he told Gershom Scholem the following year, “and cannot explicate it, cannot be a true philosophy.”¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁶ See, for reference, Benjamin’s December 23, 1917 letter to Gershom Scholem in *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*.

¹⁴⁷ Walter Benjamin, “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 1*, ed. M. Bullock and M.W. Jennings (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1996), 100.

¹⁴⁸ Walter Benjamin, “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy,” 108.

¹⁴⁹ Walter Benjamin, “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy,” 108.

¹⁵⁰ Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. H. Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1981): 59.

For Benjamin, the willingness of the surrealists to not only accept, but to actually *privilege* those individual experiences that were not solely based in fact, was particularly appealing. “The loosening of the self by intoxication”—and not only drug-induced intoxication but religious and artistic ecstasies, as well as madness and manic fits—“is, at the same time, precisely the fruitful, living experience that allowed [the surrealists] to step outside of the charmed space of intoxication.”¹⁵¹ The belief that *any* individual experience carried within it a grain of truth was surrealism’s great weapon in the battle for the re-enchantment of the world, for a “new world society in which the imagination would constitute the only power,” as Franklin Rosemont put it in 1973.¹⁵² The politics of equality that defined the movement, especially, as we have already seen, in its later years, dictated that the surrealist experience of the world—which was, for all intents and purposes, the authentic, even *redemptive* or *revelatory* experience of the world—must be freely accessible, and flexible enough to encompass the most far-reaching manifestations of true human freedom that one might encounter. “Poetry must be made by all. Not by one,” reads the infamous dictum of Isidore Ducasse—Comte de Lautréamont, surrealist precursor, and author of *Les Chants de Maldoror*; a serious statement, indeed, for a group of young ideologues who were, by their own admission, committed to living the “poetic life.”¹⁵³ If surrealism was to welcome all the disenchanting into its secret bond, then by its very definition it had to integrate

¹⁵¹ Walter Benjamin, “Surrealism,” 208.

¹⁵² Franklin Rosemont, “Crisis of the Imagination,” 14. Though the Chicago Surrealist Group would only first develop more than twenty years after Benjamin’s death, this is, without a doubt, one of the surrealist manifestations that remains closest to what Benjamin thought of as the movement’s critical and political praxis. Even more than the original Paris group, and perhaps rivaled in their militancy only by the Prague group and the group in Haiti, the Chicago surrealists used both Marxism and anarchism as a springboard from which to continue the development of Breton’s original—if occasionally abstruse—political project, not entirely dissimilar to what Benjamin would eventually do with Breton’s *Nadja* and Argon’s *Paris Peasant* in the *Arcades Project*. Interestingly, though, the Chicago incarnation of the surrealist project is also where surrealism begins to differ from Benjamin on several key points, among them the distinction between the *unity* of concepts and the *equality* of concepts—a distinction which ultimately distinguishes Benjamin’s (and Breton’s) uneasy messianic project with the Rosemonts’ more clearly political one—and the question of meaning in relation to the surrealist use of language.

¹⁵³ Isidore Ducasse (Comte de Lautréamont), “Poésies,” in *Maldoror and the Complete Works of the Comte de Lautréamont*, trans. A. Lykiard (Cambridge: Exact Change, 1994), 244; Benjamin, “Surrealism,” 208.

everything with which it came into contact, which meant taking intoxication and madness, dreams and delusions, and the most ignoble of actions in stride, incorporating them into the collective character of the surrealist world while, at the same time, maintaining each one as a pure individuality. To say, as some certainly have,¹⁵⁴ that the surrealist world is a world of fragments is not altogether untrue, but it is important to realize that these fragments form a collectivity, a unified multiplicity in which equal importance was placed upon each instance of surreality, which could be widely shared, transmitted across all boundaries—physical, mental, and otherwise.

The strong Communist tendencies in the surrealist politics of equality are obvious, and Benjamin, at least, was quick to pick up on these glimmers of a political project at work, even if the PCF remained skeptical of surrealism's worth as a political project. At the same time, however, what fascinated Benjamin the most in the surrealist politics of equality was something more subtle, something that reached back to the problematic opposition between the divine and profane realms that he, himself, had written about in earlier texts.¹⁵⁵ The surrealists had stumbled onto something interesting in their experiments with language: the possibility of using words, and concepts, *against themselves*. Traditional religious practice bestowed revelation only upon the few, the chosen ones. The surrealists flipped revelation upside down, suggesting that true revelation was a shared experience available not just to the

¹⁵⁴ Much of the literature on surrealism and fragmentation relates to the spatial fragmentation often apparent in the visual art associated with the movement—the work of André Masson is a good example, and one which Breton, himself, had to address when several PCF comrades decried the fourth issue of *La Revolution surrealiste* as sadistic, as a result of Masson's painting *The Armour*, which shows a fragmented female form. Masson has argued, as has Breton, that the spatial fragmentation in the painting represented an analogy between the waking world and the world of dreams, but Breton's PCF comrades apparently interpreted the dissolution of the female form in the painting literally. On this point, see Raymond Spiteri, "Surrealism and the Political Physiognomy of the Marvellous," in Raymond Spiteri and Don LaCoss, *Surrealism, Politics, and Culture* (Hants, Burlington: Ashgate, 2003), 60-61. For their part, the surrealists seem to have viewed the fragmentation of the human form as an experiment in de-contextualization and re-contextualization.

¹⁵⁵ Benjamin's work on the theory of translation as a link between the divine and the profane of language is of particular interest, but is outside the scope of the present study. See, though, his essays "The Task of the Translator" and "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," which I have studied in detail in other essays.

few, but to the many, to the “all.” And, what’s more, they located that revelatory experience not in some supernatural, other-worldly epistemology, but in a materialist conception of a redeemed everyday world. Breton’s appropriation of theological language and figures was, indeed, a theological reading against the grain: not meant to be ironic, but rather, theology used to present a challenge to itself—a surrealist practice that would be repeated time and again in increasingly political contexts, in the years that followed. Thus, Breton would write of surrealism 1929:

Fully mindful ... that the most precious gifts of the mind cannot survive the smallest particle of honor, I shall simply reaffirm my unshakable confidence in the principle of an activity which has never deceived me, which seems to me more deserving than ever of our unstinting, absolute, insane devotion, for the simple reason that it alone is the dispenser, albeit at intervals well spaced out one from the other, of transfiguring rays of a grace I persist in comparing in all respects to divine grace.¹⁵⁶

In Benjamin’s estimation, then, the surrealists had taken the traditional figure of the vice, of the *profane*, and turned it into a methodological principle, creating a space where human baseness could stand on equal footing with a traditional conception of goodness. Thinking about Dostoevsky’s Stavrogin—“a Surrealist *avant la lettre*”—Benjamin wrote:

No one else understood, as he did, how naïve philistines are when they say that goodness ... is God-inspired, but that evil stems entirely from our spontaneity, and in it we are independent and self-sufficient beings. No one else saw inspiration, as he did, in even the most ignoble actions, and precisely in them.... Dostoevsky’s God created not only heaven and earth and man and beast, but also baseness, vengeance, cruelty.... That is why all these vices have a pristine vitality ... they are perhaps not

¹⁵⁶ André Breton, “Preface for a Reprint of the Manifesto [1929],” in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, xi.

“splendid,” but eternally new, “as on the first day”....¹⁵⁷

Not only vice and evil—themes historically associated with the fallen state of man—played a role in the surrealist epistemology, but so too did human imperfection. Breton’s early interest in Freud, and in theories of madness and psychoanalysis, had led him to locate moments of revelation in a variety of conditions that were usually considered to be abnormal, and which were certainly not included in the traditional paradigms of redemption or revolution. The surrealists had, early on and rather enthusiastically, proclaimed their support for a wealth of highly publicized challenges to the status quo, from a series of unlikely characters, including the Berber guerrilla fighter Abdel El Krim, whose Rif uprising in Morocco was mentioned in an earlier chapter. The first issue of *La Révolution Surréaliste* included a full-page photo collage in which headshots of twenty-eight of the surrealists (including Breton, Soupault, and Aragon, among others) surrounded a central image of the militant anarchist Germaine Berton, who had, just a few months earlier, stormed the Paris offices of the extreme right-wing newspaper *Action Française*, where she shot and killed politician Marius Plateau. Berton had attempted to kill herself after shooting Plateau, but failed. In the trial that followed, attorneys for the defense had attempted to enter a plea of insanity, but Berton staunchly insisted that she had been in her right mind, and had carefully planned all of her actions. Louis Aragon called her a “beacon of ‘absolute liberty.’”¹⁵⁸ Indeed, “the surrealists understood the acts of Berton and [other women who committed similar or related acts] to be forms of historical agency in their own right, and not simply degenerate acts of perversity or evil.”¹⁵⁹ Ten years later, the surrealists would rally to the defense of eighteen-year-old Violette Nozière, who had been arrested in a well-publicized case for poisoning her father

¹⁵⁷ Walter Benjamin, “Surrealism,” 214.

¹⁵⁸ Jonathan Paul Eburne, *Surrealism and the Art of Crime*, 76.

¹⁵⁹ Jonathan Paul Eburne, *Surrealism and the Art of Crime*, 3.

who she claimed had been abusing her since the age of twelve. In the face of the mainstream presentation of Nozière's case as one of "disgraced and degenerate youth," the surrealists published a book of poems in her honor, in which her "parricide became instead a form of autobiographical revision whose desperation laid bare the structures of patriarchal power and privilege at work in the family, in the state, and in the medical-legal system as well."¹⁶⁰

Surrealism, it seemed to Benjamin, had essentially turned the traditional hierarchy of redemption inside out, eschewing the blunt distinction between good and evil in favor of a more inclusive paradigm that saw the possibility of true freedom in all of the instances of human imperfection. But we should be wary here, because this narrative of madness and intoxication can be misleading, giving the impression that surrealism is nothing more than an extreme form of absurdity, a kind of dream logic, a psychic movement entirely divorced from everyday reality. Such a perception is true neither of the surrealists, nor of Benjamin himself. In Benjaminian terms, we have to understand the notion of the "profane" in all of its meanings: in its most basic usage, the "profane" world is simply the earthly, material world, a space which neither Benjamin nor the surrealists ever seek to transcend. *Surreality* is never intended to be a reality divorced from the object world around us—it is not a transcendent reality, in the sense of a transference from man to a higher power. Surreality is, instead, a heightened sense of reality, an awareness of the world that goes beyond a simple first glance, a way of seeing the potential contained within everything around us. The surreal is, in fact, *more* real, not less. Benjamin touches—as do the surrealists, from time to time—upon the elements of the "divine," encompassing them as both theoretical and methodological principles, but the Benjaminian messianic possibility is always a "weak" one; this is not to suggest that Benjamin's work is abstract or immaterial, but rather to point out,

¹⁶⁰ Jonathan Paul Eburne, *Surrealism and the Art of Crime*, 3.

as Benjamin himself does, that to fully accept the theological principle would be an abstraction, in and of itself. Indeed, the continued connection to the profane realm—the everyday world—is what concretizes and complicates the theological concepts that both Benjamin and the surrealists employ, and makes possible the link between theology and politics that characterizes Benjamin’s later work on history.¹⁶¹ This is, perhaps, the truest understanding of Benjamin’s famous *profane illumination*: by their own admission, the surrealists were engaged in the project of freeing the world from a system in which experience was postulated, but ultimately withheld, a system much like the neo-Kantian paradigm, which Benjamin described as “a praxis that presents the public with a literary precipitate of a certain form of existence while withholding that existence itself.”¹⁶² The surrealist “profane illumination,” on the other hand, was both “materialistic” and “anthropological,” because it was ultimately derived from an intimate bond between human existence and the (secret) world of things.¹⁶³

For Benjamin who, by 1928, was already deeply invested in a radical re-reading of Marx, following his introduction to Marxist theory through the work of Georg Lukács, whose *History and Class Consciousness* and *Theory of the Novel* Benjamin had read in 1924,¹⁶⁴ the surrealists seemed to fulfill the desire for a secular messianism that Marx had suggested was to be found in the object world. As Benjamin understood it, Marx had suggested that the capitalist system of commodity and production had brought about the alienation of labor, in

¹⁶¹ On another level, however, the work of Benjamin and the surrealists is also profane because it is impure—it is composed of fragments, of various elements ripped from their contexts and imbued with a new significance, and hence a new life.

¹⁶² Walter Benjamin, “Surrealism,” 208.

¹⁶³ Walter Benjamin, “Surrealism,” 209.

¹⁶⁴ There is a significant and interesting comparison to be made between Lukács and Benjamin, but it is well outside the scope of the present study. For an extended discussion of Lukács’ early exploration of the artistic-critical tradition, see Martin Jay’s excellent overview in *Marxism and Totality* (Berkeley: U California P, 1984), especially pages 81-102. On Benjamin and Lukács, see Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* (New York: Columbia UP, 1982), especially pages 108-118. Benjamin’s turn to, and investment in Marxism was, in no small way, a result of his relationship with the Bolshevik theater director Asja Lācis, as well as Bertold Brecht, who Benjamin met through Lācis in 1929.

the sense that the conscious link between the worker and his product was one of abstract (rather than concrete) relation. In alienated labor, the product was, to the worker, nothing more than a symbolic representation of his labor power. Benjamin actually dedicates an entire Konvolut of the *Arcades Project* to Marx's theory of political economy, citing an important passage from *Capital*:

The fact that money can, in certain functions, be replaced by mere symbols of itself gave rise to that other mistaken notion that it is itself a mere symbol.... In this sense, every commodity is a symbol, since, insofar as it is value, it is only the material envelope of the human labor spent upon it. But if it be declared that ... the material forms assumed by the social qualities of labor under the regime of a definite mode of production are mere symbols, it is in the same breath also declared that these characteristics are arbitrary fictions by the so-called universal consent of mankind.¹⁶⁵

For Marx, false-consciousness (the self-alienation of the worker) comes about through the division of material and mental labor—a division imposed by the even greater division between classes—when consciousness appears to represent *something* without actually representing *something real*. In the ideal communist world of production, however, mental and material labor would be brought back together in a classless society and the commodity system would cease to be one solely of individual importance. Marxism has, of course, an important communal quality to it: Marx's new mode of production transcended notions of "private property," and labor was re-introduced as a way of achieving what we might call a strange sense of human totality—each man toils not only for himself and his family, but for the good of human life in general. In Benjaminian terms, the particular becomes a way of assuring the existence of the universal, in the same way that a translation assures the survival

¹⁶⁵ Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, [X3, 6].

of an original text, in a different language and context. The key to the revolutionary overturning of capitalist modes of production is the elimination of the individualized “commodity character” of alienated production—the necessity of labor (inherent in the capitalist system) that ensured that the character of work would always remain abstract. If the commodity character is eliminated, products cease to be only abstract symbols of themselves, and are able to contribute to the concretization of the relationship between man and object.

Again, to reinterpret this in Benjaminian terms is not difficult: things exist by virtue of a language that is defined by their relationship to other things, a language which can be communicated (*translated*) by human language—in Marx’s system, the language of human production, distribution, and consumption. If the relationship between the language of things and human language is weak and abstract, then experience and the interpretation of that experience (knowledge and all epistemology) is also abstract and, as such, is false and fragmented. It is only through the re-establishment of a concrete relation between the language of things and the language of man that we can hope to find any sort of real revolutionary experience of the world, or any totality of existence.

Thus, it is of great political importance that Benjamin defines the surrealist world as “a world of things,” of everyday objects, each one of which might contain within itself the potential to push experience to its limits, to explode the spheres of art, religion, politics, and even time itself.¹⁶⁶ Breton was the first, Benjamin argued, to sense the “revolutionary energies” contained within the “enslaved and enslaving objects,” which, however closely related to the present, still belonged to times past, those things that appeared “outmoded,” “destitute,” like the first iron constructions, the Paris arcades, factory buildings, and old

¹⁶⁶ Benjamin, “Surrealism,” 210.

photographs—indeed, the objects and technology of an era of progress that was quickly growing obsolete.¹⁶⁷ Surrealism postulated a new way of interacting with the everyday world, bringing the “immense forces of ‘atmosphere’” concealed in the unnoticed and forgotten objects of the everyday “to the point of explosion.”¹⁶⁸ It was, as Benjamin would point out, was a way of treating the past *politically* instead of *historically*, which is not to say that history had to become irrelevant, but rather to suggest that these objects from the past could still exert a *force* over the present, and that the project of bringing this force into resonance with the present world could, indeed, expose the sort of “surrealist experience” both Breton and Benjamin wanted in some form. (“Politics attains primacy over history,” Benjamin writes cryptically in the *Arcades Project*.¹⁶⁹)

Breton, Soupault, and especially Aragon, as well as the other early surrealists embraced the outmoded and destitute objects of an increasingly industrialized and nationalist France, and adopted an intermingling of past and present, of dream and reality, as a methodological principle. Though they remained, as always, *politically* grounded in the present, the Paris surrealists railed against Jean-Paul Sartre’s positing of the “engaged intellectual” and invoked their own central concept of *automatism*, a sort of engaged disengagement, or a radical form of spontaneous experience that was intended to bring the world of intoxication into balance with the world of objects. Rather than moving away from either real or imagined objects, the aim of the surrealists was to bring the two together on an

¹⁶⁷ Benjamin, “Surrealism,” 210-211.

¹⁶⁸ Walter Benjamin, “Surrealism,” 210.

¹⁶⁹ Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, [K1, 2]. On the topic of treating the past politically, Jean-Luc Nancy has an instructive note in his essay “The Inoperative Community”: “Political’ would mean a community ordering itself to the unworking of its communication, or destined to this unworking: a community consciously undergoing the experience of its sharing” (Jean-Luc Nancy, “The Inoperative Community,” in *The Inoperative Community* [Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1991]: 40.) Though Nancy is not discussing in this passage Benjamin’s surrealism essay, the comparison is an apt one in the context of surrealism’s historical project. What Nancy suggests is a political form that is based in the transmission of a communal experience; though ultimately different than surrealism’s approach to the “political,” Nancy’s political community bears some resemblance to the surrealist notion of a “community of ethical views” at the root of its revolutionary practice.

immanent plane: “a real *insulation*, thanks to which, the mind on finding itself ideally withdrawn from everything, can begin to occupy itself with its own life, in which the attained [reality] and the desired [imaginary] no longer exclude one another.”¹⁷⁰

The surrealists saw these encounters with the lives of objects both as an engagement with the world of created things—technological objects, buildings, and structures, in short, objects constructed by man—and, at the same time, an engagement with the natural world. According to Penelope Rosemont, “Meret Oppenheim identified the key methodological principle [of surrealism] when she pointed out in 1955 that works produced via psychic automatism ‘will always remain alive and will always be revolutionary ... because they are in organic liaison with Nature’.”¹⁷¹ The surrealist appreciation of Nature stems not from a view of the natural world as fixed and immutable, and as defined by a set of transcendently predetermined conditions, but rather springs forth as an irreverent, organic materialism. Instead of opposing an image of a fixed natural world to an image of the constantly shifting world of human progress—a world reproduced in the scores of outmoded, forgotten objects left by the wayside, an ever-growing heap of the victims of “progress” as contemplated by Walter Benjamin’s famous “angel of History”¹⁷²—surrealism sought to bring these worlds together, suggesting that a revolutionary potential could be unleashed if one managed to interact with the world of human progress in the same fashion that one interacted with the natural world.

Surrealism’s engagement with the natural world runs through the movement from

¹⁷⁰ André Breton, “Surrealism and Painting,” trans. S.W. Taylor, in *Surrealism and Painting* (Boston: MFA Publications, 2002), 4.

¹⁷¹ Penelope Rosemont, “All My Names Know Your Leap,” li. Meret Oppenheim was one of the key women involved with the surrealist movement in Paris between the two world wars. She is, as has already been mentioned in the present study, perhaps most well known as the creator of the famous surrealist object *Dejeuner en fourrure*, often called *Fur-Covered Cup, Saucer, and Spoon*. See Penelope Rosemont, *Surrealist Women*, p. 74, for more background on Oppenheim.

¹⁷² The angel of history, which is a reference to Paul Klee’s “Angelus Novus” painting, appears in Benjamin’s famous essay, “On the Concept of History,” written in 1940 just shortly before he was forced to flee Vichy France. The intermingling of Benjamin’s dialectical materialism and his surrealism is vividly apparent in this essay.

start to, well, if not *finish*, then *present*, at least, but the work of British painter, novelist, and lifelong surrealist Leonora Carrington is of particular importance. Carrington has the distinction of having been one of two surrealists actively involved in both the Paris surrealist group around Breton, and the Chicago surrealist group (the other was Philip Lamantia), and Franklin Rosemont was fond of proclaiming that as much as Chicago surrealism was Bretonian in character, it was also, and just as much “Leonora Carringtonian.” Carrington had emigrated to Mexico after her split from the German surrealist Max Ernst, but remained in contact with the surviving members of the Paris surrealist group. In the years just before the founding of the Chicago surrealist group, a young Franklin Rosemont travelled to Mexico to meet her, and the two struck up a lively, lasting correspondence. When Carrington moved to Chicago for a period in the 1980s, she participated in the group’s activities there. It was Carrington’s influence that encouraged the Chicago surrealist group to include a strong interest in the liaison with nature in their political program—so much so that members of the Chicago surrealist group co-founded the Chicago chapter of Earth First!, of which Carrington was a militant supporter. “Like Breton,” according to Ron Sakolsky, Carrington “had a deep interest in the ‘special knowledge’ possessed by birds and other wild creatures and wondered how we might learn from that knowledge.”¹⁷³

What Carrington and the other surrealists privileged in nature was its unpredictability, its close relationship with the world of *chance*, a concept that arose time and again throughout the movement’s development. It is, indeed, this figure of chance that is at the center of all surrealist production, and what is at stake in the chance encounter is, precisely, the moment at which something old is experienced as something radically and “eternally new,” as Benjamin described it in relation to Doestoevsky’s theology of vice, and

¹⁷³ Ron Sakolsky, “The Surrealist Adventure and the Poetry of Direct Action,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Protest* 8 (2011), available online at http://www.joaap.org/issue8/Sakolsky_surrealists.htm (accessed 8-24-13).

as Breton demonstrated when, in *Nadja*, he described his sudden ability to experience the city of Paris as though it were his first encounter while, at the same time, never losing sight of the historical implications—the past lives, if one prefers—of the places and objects he encountered. Penelope Rosemont goes so far as to cite this liason between surrealism and nature, between surrealism and the objects with which it engages, as nothing less than the central issue at stake in the surrealist politics of equality:

This is the very basis of surrealism as a revolutionary community: the unity of theory and practice at the highest point of tension of individual and collective creation....

Such a conception of life and the world, defined by audacity and readiness for change, is the opposite of all the dominant ideologies of our time.... All here is urgency and expectation, and the conviction that a poetics of revolt is the only way that might—just might—lead us all to something at least a little closer to earthly paradise.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷⁴ Penelope Rosemont, “All My Names Know Your Leap,” li.

Chapter Four: The Alchemy of the Everyday

“Everything I love, everything I think and feel,” André Breton wrote in 1928, “predisposes me to a particular philosophy of immanence according to which surreality would be embodied in reality itself, and would be neither superior nor exterior to it.”¹⁷⁵ Though Breton would only articulate the relationship of the real and the surreal as one of immanence late in the Parisian movement’s development, the notion of surrealism as a mode of communication, as a tool to be employed in the project of understanding reality, is present throughout the Paris years, and becomes even stronger in the movement’s later incarnations in the United States and elsewhere. It is notable that the passage quoted above continues: “And reciprocally, too, because the container would also be the contents. What I envisage is almost a communicating vessel between the container and the contained.”¹⁷⁶ This image of the “communicating vessel” is crucial to our understanding of surrealism’s political and historical project, in part because it frames and entitles one of Breton’s most revealing texts (written in 1932¹⁷⁷), but also, and perhaps more importantly, because it indicates a sensitivity toward the “natural sweep of a merging universe, where an element from one field crosses over into the next like the elements in surrealist games,” or like the flow of water and stored up energy between the vertical tubes in the elementary school science experiment from which Breton draws this name.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁵ André Breton, “Surrealism and Painting,” 46.

¹⁷⁶ André Breton, “Surrealism and Painting,” 46.

¹⁷⁷ See André Breton, *Communicating Vessels* (Omaha: U Nebraska P, 1997).

¹⁷⁸ Mary Ann Caws, “Reading André Breton,” *Context* 11 (2002), available online at <http://www.centerforbookculture.org/context/no11/Caws.html>. “Communicating vessels” is used to describe one of the most basic examples of a system in modern physics. The experiment—or demonstration, more accurately—uses a number of vertical tubes of different heights and shapes that “communicate” by a tube that joins them together at the bottom. According to the laws of the physics of fluid, any increase or decrease of water in one tube affects the water in all of the other tubes and results in an immediate shifting of matter to achieve an absolute equilibrium in the water level, and thus the potential energy of the milligrams of water on the surface of each tube. In essence, the communicating vessels effectively represent a single vessel.

The aim here is not so much *unity* as it is *equality*. Just as in the communicating vessel, unity—or the potential for communication across the boundaries between binary oppositions—is presupposed in the surrealist world, but equality between divergent concepts and more importantly equality in the access that one may have to such notions, is yet to be achieved. For the messianic thinkers closest to the surrealist movement, Benjamin among them, human time is fallen time. Man inhabits the profane realm and is charged with the task of rediscovering the sacred in the everyday, in some way restoring the *analogia entis* between the divine and the earthly realm. But, as we already learned from the Chicago surrealists, there is nothing sacred in surrealism. For the surrealists, on the contrary, the sacred is a useless term, not lost, but wholly inaccessible. Entirely bound up with restrictive structures of authority, and used as little more than an ontological velvet rope to keep certain ideas and objects out of the reaches of everyday life, the “sacred” was, for the surrealists, little more than a tool of repression. Because it is indicative of a hierarchy that makes unattainable true human freedom, the sacred is transformed into exactly that which must be overcome in pursuit of true spirit, which is perhaps best known under the surrealist watchword of the *Marvelous*.

The experience of the Marvelous—for it is an experience, and not a quality—is best described as the experience of a world suddenly brought into balance by a chance encounter. And, the surrealists were, as Benjamin was quick to point out, not always up to the challenge of recognizing the moment when the Marvelous flashed before them.¹⁷⁹ This is an interesting, and, indeed, a crucial point: if we define surrealism, as Benjamin does, as something more than a confluence of thinkers, a school of aesthetic practice, or a historically-determined intellectual movement, and define it as, instead, the experience of the

¹⁷⁹ See, for example, Walter Benjamin, “Surrealism,” 209.

Marvelous in the everyday world, then surrealism becomes an object in a game of chance, an unlikely revelation, entirely *profane* in nature, and a mode of being in the world that Breton enigmatically defines as a quasi-divine “state of grace.”¹⁸⁰ It is, then, something that *happens*, that takes one by surprise although, to be sure, one must already be open to the idea, and *believe* in its possibility. The concept of the automatic—automation, automated, automaton—becomes far more complex and even dialectical than it seems at first glance, and bears further scrutiny if we are to truly make sense of the “pure psychic automatism,” that Breton located at the center, and the start, of surrealism’s growth into a fully-fledged theory of revolution.

“Auto,” derived from the Greek reflexive pronoun that roughly translates as “self,” carries, in our modern tongue, the dual connotation of self and other, in the sense of both an internal and external influence; more problematically, the entire word “automatic” has, in English at least, the double weight of indicating both something spontaneous, that happens without forethought, and, at the same time, an occurrence so carefully studied and planned, so *ordinary and mundane*, that it is, for lack of a better phrase, entirely internalized as a droning system of rhythmic, repetitious actions. This complexity is not frequently grasped by the manifold literature on the subject; automatism and its associated concepts are used in such a myriad of ways, and in so many divergent contexts, that both theoretically and pragmatically, even within the literature produced by the movement itself, a comprehensive historical treatment of its increasingly productive artistic, political, and literary usage continues to become more and more impossible (even as it becomes more and more urgent).¹⁸¹ For the

¹⁸⁰ André Breton, “Surrealism and Painting,” 9.

¹⁸¹ It is worth noting a recent resurgence of interest in the concept of automatism in art criticism and theory, in part spurred by Rosalind Krauss’ 2011 book, *Under Blue Cup*, which interrogates Stanley Cavell’s concept of “automatism”—a kind of self-generative medium, an art practice that generates new instances of itself, providing the experience of art having happened “of itself,” autonomously from the artist. Michael Fried, who, like Krauss, was an early adherent of art critic Clement Greenberg, and is today a close colleague of Stanley Cavell, has also posed

present purposes, though, we should keep in mind this dual character of the automatic as spontaneous and rote—both specific and general, context-driven and universal—at one and the same time. It is this duality at the heart of the automatic experience that ties together the early surrealist experiments with language to the later vernacular surrealist endeavors that to which I will turn in the chapters that follow this one.

That automatism is invoked here as a central concept should come as no surprise. Even before Breton linked the “discovery” of automatism with the birth of surrealism in the first “Manifesto of Surrealism” in 1924, he had already, in 1919, collaborated with Philippe Soupault on *The Magnetic Fields*, the first set of texts that would explicitly be classified as “*Surrealist* (and in no sense Dada) since it is the fruit of the first systematic use of automatic writing,” as he told André Parinaud in 1952.¹⁸² *The Magnetic Fields* was, in a sense, the systematized expression of surrealist automatism *par excellence*, a collaborative collection of texts composed entirely of “spontaneously irrupting autonomous phrases,” suggestive of a state of waking dream, a hallucination, or even a revelation—words and phrases that were culled together without forethought or examination, whose collective meaning became clear only in retrospect.¹⁸³ Even before the surrealists had begun to fully comprehend the true weight of what they had discovered, Breton set forth what was to be a basic method for achieving automatism, in his now famous “Secrets of the Magical Surrealist Art” directive:

interesting questions about the relationship of automatism and agency as it relates to the question of medium, most recently in his 2008 book, *Why Photography Matters As Art As Never Before*. Despite the richness of these discussions and debates within the world of art theory, these uses of automatism largely remain in the realm of descriptive terminology, even if they bear resemblances in some ways to the early surrealist use of the term. Unlike surrealist automatism, which denotes a practice and a process, these critical uses of the term are used to describe a medium that is ultimately exterior to the artist. Surrealism’s automatism is very pointedly epistemological—it is tied to the experience of the practitioner. See Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1979); Rosalind Krauss, *Under Blue Cup* (Boston: MIT Press, 2011); and Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters As Art As Never Before* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2008). See also the special Summer 2012 issue of *Critical Inquiry* edited by Diarmuid Costello and Margaret Iversen, “Agency and Automatism: Photography As Art Since the Sixties.”

¹⁸² Quoted in David Gascoyne, “Introduction to *The Magnetic Fields*,” in *The Automatic Message* (London: Atlas Press, 1997), 44.

¹⁸³ Gascoyne, “Introduction to *The Magnetic Fields*,” 41.

After you have settled yourself in a place as favorable as possible to the concentration of your mind upon itself, have writing materials brought to you. Put yourself in as passive or receptive state of mind as you can. Forget about your genius, your talents, and the talents of everyone else. Keep reminding yourself that literature is one of the saddest roads that leads to everything. Write quickly, without any preconceived subject, fast enough so that you will not remember what you're writing and be tempted to read what you have written. The first sentence will come spontaneously, so compelling is the truth that with every passing second there is a sentence unknown to our consciousness which is crying out to be heard....¹⁸⁴

Automatic *writing*, as described by Breton, is the most explicit example of how to catalyze objective chance in a productive fashion, and it is an act that requires the utmost discipline to be pulled off properly. It is not, as some might suggest, an exercise in absurdity, nor is it a free-form literary genre. If one engages in the practice of automatic writing, then one is charged with the difficult task of vigilantly resisting the temptation to interrupt the flow of words by reading, examining, or altering what they have set down upon the page. This is *not* to say that the products of automatic writing resist interpretation. But interpretation, illumination, or learning from what is produced and from what has taken place comes only afterwards, and almost as an afterthought. The automatic method requires the writer to make a leap of faith by opening themselves up to the unfettered flow of thoughts, to have absolute and unwavering faith in the process that they are about to undertake. What is of importance is, as always, the actual *experience* one has during the process of creation, *rather* than what one actually produces, for the products of truly automatic writing arise randomly, instead of coming in the form of reflections on a pre-determined topic. Just as the early

¹⁸⁴

André Breton, "Manifesto of Surrealism," in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 30.

surrealists could never anticipate which specific objects might suddenly emerge as catalysts for a chance encounter with the Marvelous as they ambled along the streets and through the arcades of 1920s Paris, the outcome of their experimentation with automatic writing couldn't be specifically anticipated either.

It is of critical importance that we understand that automatic writing, in the surrealist sense, was *never* intended to be a literary (or artistic) mode of expression. Breton and Soupault may have had Rimbaud's "Alchimie du Verbe" and Lautréamont's *Les Chants de Maldoror* in the back of their minds, but the project they undertook in the spring of 1919 was wholly unparalleled. Automatism is nothing less than an entirely new way of looking at the world, and while its products may, in some way, serve as a poetic expression (remembering that for the surrealists poetry was akin to revolt) for others to consume, it is the lived experience of the process that is of critical importance. What was truly revolutionary about surrealist automatism was that it transformed the writer, as the words flowed forth from a point unknown onto the page. And, it is this focus that differentiates surrealist automatism from more literary practices like stream of consciousness, and, instead, links it with a more radical conception of the transmission of experience, one similar to Walter Benjamin's storyteller in the essay of the same name. Like Benjamin's storyteller, who leaves his mark on each and every story he tells, subtly changing the story to encompass his own continuity of experience while, at the same time, he himself is changed by the story, surrealist automatism is a process by which people and ideas change, grow, and flow together.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁵ See Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Work of Nikolai Leskov," in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Volume 3. In the context of a literary analysis of Leskov's work, Benjamin suggests an interesting epistemological dimension to the art of storytelling; stories grow, and change, as a result of the experience of being told. Every storyteller, Benjamin says, leaves his or her "mark" on the story, such that the story itself becomes a living record of all of those storytellers—and audiences—with whom it has had some contact. Each storyteller subtly changes the story in some way of their own, making it unique, yet at the same time, linking it to a longer trajectory of the life of the story, in a sense serving as epoch and caesura at one and the same time. Benjamin's storyteller has a great deal to do with the idea of the surrealist historian that forms the central object of investigation of this present

Surrealist automatism's closest literary counterpart is the stream of consciousness method, loosely derived from the psychological writings of William James on the flow of the inner consciousness, and adapted to literary practice by Édouard Dujardin, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner, among others, but the two differ significantly. Stream of consciousness depends upon a radical leap outside of conventional narrative sequence and logical argumentation, and is intended to fully reflect the multiple forces—both internal and external—that might influence a character at any given time.¹⁸⁶ On a surface comparison of automatism and stream of consciousness, the two bear some resemblances; on a deeper investigation, however, one notices that the stream of consciousness proceeds from exactly the type of external reflection that automatism cannot possibly include. At its base, the stream of consciousness method depends upon a mental movement that is best described as “thinking through something,” and its ultimate aim is the unfettered expression of thoughts; surrealist automatism, on the other hand, aims at the total revolution of the mind—not just the freedom of thought.

Surrealist automatism, like most heterodox theories of praxis, cannot simply be approached from a single point of view. In one sense, it can be seen as the ultimately solipsistic, individual, experience—the writer settles him or herself down alone, with no distractions, with nothing more than the sound of his or her own quick breath and the scratching of the pen upon the page, in search of an experience of the world that is revelatory and magical, an unbridled state of joy, one hopes, free from intention, punctuated by glimpses of some understanding that is manifestly, unquestionably, true. At the same

study, but a longer analysis of this similarity is sadly outside the scope of this work.

¹⁸⁶ On the first use of “stream of consciousness,” see chapter 10 of William James, *Principles of Psychology* (1890), where James outlines the concept as a collection of ever-changing inner thoughts and sensations that belong to every conscious individual. Dujardin was the first author to notably employ the technique in his 1888 novel, *Les Lauriers sont coupés*, although May Sinclair was, perhaps, the first to explicitly transfer the term from the psychological context to the literary one in a 1918 essay published in *The Egoist*.

time, in its other, and perhaps more practical sense, automatism is defined by an explicitly political and even universalizing goal: it is a creative framework constructed to allow us to gain some control over the language that shapes and defines our everyday experience of the world around us, and the objects within it. Surrealism in this second sense—which is intimately bound up with its other, more metaphysical aims—has the power to “liberate language from its utilitarian and prosaic regimentation,” and in so doing, “to assist in creating the revolutionary situation, which, as Marx put it, ‘makes all turning back impossible’.”¹⁸⁷ There are (at least) two moments at work in surrealism’s critical practice, one joyous and the other revolutionary, yet they share a common goal, and each one is shot through with elements of the other. The Marvelous itself is what is at stake in surrealist automatism: more than a by-product of a psychic experiment, more than a beautiful—or even a sublime—object, the Marvelous is an active way of experiencing the world. Every surrealist experience is, in its own way, self-revelatory, at the same time that it reveals the practical truth of the world around us, as Philip Lamantia proclaimed:

A few of us ... have begun to practice what amounts to a collective restoration of the powers of poetic unity and as we appear, historically together intervening on the plane of American “culture” and with *all the chips stacked against us*,... I know that only armed with the living perspectives of surrealism ... am I permitted to make distinctions, draw up a relentless criticism and inveigh against those crimes now being committed against the human spirit by mystifiers, fabricators of confusion, and all our detractors....¹⁸⁸

The goal is not so much a greater understanding of the self (as would be the case with, say,

¹⁸⁷ Franklin Rosemont, “The Crisis of the Imagination,” 15.

¹⁸⁸ Philip Lamantia, “Notes Toward a Rigorous Interpretation of Surrealist Occultation,” *Arsenal* 3 (Chicago: Black Swan Press, 1976); reprinted in *Surrealist Subversions*, 439.

stream of consciousness), but of the world—a “profane illumination,” a vernacular inspiration that comes from the depths of humanity, that is drawn from the layers upon layers of memories collected by generations of lived experiences, called forth at the point at which human intentionality gives way to the logic of chance: universal and particular at the same time. Indeed, automatism relies upon no absolute externality, no divine word handed down from a higher power, nor a prophetic word filtered through man-as-medium;¹⁸⁹ it looks instead toward everyday language as the privileged site from which to capture “a moment in which ... antinomies no longer have any meaning, in which knowledge completely takes hold of things, in which language is not speech, but reality itself, yet without ceasing to be the proper reality of language.”¹⁹⁰

That automatic writing has, over time, become the primary expression of surrealist automatism is, of course, no coincidence. Language had been the site of the surrealists’ first discovery of the “magical aspect of things” that would so interest Benjamin a decade later, as it would all of surrealism’s fellow travelers. “Surrealists became aware,” Maurice Blanchot wrote in his 1949 reflections on the movement, “of the strange nature of words: they saw that words have their own spontaneity.... [They] understand, moreover, that language is not

¹⁸⁹ The fact that surrealist automatism has a basis in lived experience has an interesting resonance with the historical genesis of the practice of automatism more widely, which has its roots in the dual sense of “psychic” in Breton’s “psychic automatism in its pure state.” On the one hand, *psychic* refers back to the psychoanalytic theories of Freud and to the practice of diagnostic hypnosis, from which some of the early surrealist experiments drew their inspiration. On the other hand, and in a totally different sense of *psychic*, automatism owes much to the practice of the mystics, as well as to mediums and soothsayers. See Gascoyne’s introduction to *The Magnetic Fields* from an excellent overview of the development of the project of automatism, or see Breton’s own “The Automatic Message” in the same volume for a brief history of automatism from the standpoint of surrealism.

¹⁹⁰ Maurice Blanchot, “Reflections on Surrealism,” trans. Charlotte Mandell, in *The Work of Fire* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995), 86. “The poet demands an absolute freedom,” Blanchot concludes. “[H]e pushes away all control, he is master of his means, and just as free with respect to the literary tradition as he is indifferent to the demands of moral standards, religion, and even reading. Yet this freedom ends here: ‘Surrealism in the service of the Revolution.’... [T]he most uncommitted literature is at the same time the most committed, because it knows that to claim to be free in a society that is not free is to accept responsibility for the constraints of that society and especially to accept the mystifications of the word ‘freedom’ by which society hides its intentions.... Perhaps considering the force of these paradoxes, we will understand why surrealism is always ahead of our time” (96-97).

an inert thing; it has a life of its own, and a latent power that escapes us.”¹⁹¹ Automatism was, then, a way of harnessing this “latent,” productive power of language that eluded man’s grasp in the disenchanted—capitalist—world. Benjamin, reading surrealism through the lens of his own messianic-tinged philosophy, saw the surrealist experimentation with language as a way of closing the gap between words and concepts, between the disassociated graphical marks upon a page, and the real and concrete objects to which they referred. “Language seemed itself only where sound and image, image and sound, interpenetrated with automatic precision and such felicity that no chink was left for the penny-in-the-slot called ‘meaning,’” he exuberantly declared in the “Surrealism” essay.¹⁹² Language was a way, according to Benjamin, of achieving an absolute (surreal) experience—a way of getting at the essence of things—rather than a tool to aid in the communication of meaning or theories.

In all reality, the absolute destruction of all meaning is more dadaist in character than it is surrealist; while Breton’s philosophy of immanence, defined by the image of the communicating vessels, did aim to abolish the line between the real and the imaginary, the actual and the possible, the surrealists, like Benjamin, were still primarily concerned with *communication*, a concern that could scarcely co-exist with the abolition of all meaning. The nearly century-long language game that would follow the invention (or discovery) of surrealist automatism has an everyday application. Following in Lautréamont’s steps, Breton, Soupault, Aragon, Carrington, Peters, Péret, and the Rosemonts after them, realized that poetry—and again, here we mean something more than the setting down of rhyme upon a page—had to have *practical truth* as its goal: Lautréamont charged those who would follow him with the task of expanding poetry in such a way that it could enunciate the relationships that existed between primary epistemological principles and the secondary truths of everyday

¹⁹¹ Maurice Blanchot, “Reflections on Surrealism,” 88.

¹⁹² Walter Benjamin, “Surrealism,” 208.

life.¹⁹³ If practical truth was the goal of all truly poetic endeavor and if, as Penelope Rosemont and others have suggested, surrealism truly is a revolutionary form of community, then meaning must remain within the surrealist world, and cannot simply be destroyed or cast away entirely.

What *does* become apparent in surrealism's engagements on the linguistic field is a desire to recast language as flexible enough to allow words to cease to be inextricably tied to just one, *historically-determined* meaning. Surrealism, after all, is as much about leaving a door open for novelty as it about anything else;¹⁹⁴ if one always proceeds according to the logic of chance, as the surrealists tried to do, even if they were not always successful, then anything could happen—would happen, in fact—at any point, without any warning.

Nowhere is this relationship between language, poetry, and surrealism outlined more clearly than in Breton's programmatic text, "An Introduction to the Discourse on the Paucity of Reality." Written in 1924 and published in pamphlet form in 1927, this oft-overlooked text is one of Breton's most prescient investigations into the political position of language in the everyday world. First explaining, and then lamenting, the "immutable reality" to which language is doomed to refer, he writes that words "deserve to have another decisive function.... I believe it is not too late to recoil from this deception, inherent in the words we have thus far used so badly."¹⁹⁵ Breton's intention was to harness the poetic power of automatism (the text was composed just three months before the publication of the first manifesto) by "throwing disorder into this order of words, to attack murderously this

¹⁹³ On the question of practical truth in poetry, see Lautréamont, "Poesies," p. 237, and Franklin Rosemont, "Crisis of the Imagination," 14.

¹⁹⁴ Leon Trotsky would chastise Breton in 1938 for precisely this exaltation of the unknown in the pair's conversations during the time they spent together in Mexico, with Trotsky accusing the latter of a desire to keep open "a little window on the beyond." See Mark Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind: The Life of André Breton* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1995), 458.

¹⁹⁵ André Breton, "An Introduction to the Discourse on the Paucity of Reality," in *What Is Surrealism?*, 25.

obvious aspect of things.... Language can and should be torn from this servitude.”¹⁹⁶ The desire to rescue language from its dependent relationship with an immutable reality did not, however, manifest itself as a movement away from all meaning; rather, as it turned out, the project of rescuing language meant allowing subsequent, secondary, and multiple meanings to develop for the simplest of words and combinations—in effect leaving behind interpretation in favor of acceptance:

A rather dishonest person one day, in a note contained in an anthology, made a list of some of the images presented to us in the work of one of our greatest living poets. It read:

‘The next day of the caterpillar dressed for the ball’ ... meaning ‘butterfly.’

‘Breast of crystal ... meaning ‘carafe.’

Etc.

No, indeed, sir. *It means nothing of the kind.* Put your butterfly back in its carafe. You may be sure that Saint-Pol-Roux said exactly what he meant.¹⁹⁷

Breton would famously invoke Saint-Pol-Roux again in the 1924 Manifesto:

A story is told according to which Saint-Pol-Roux, in times gone by, used to have a notice posted on the door of his manor house in Camaret, every evening before he went to sleep, which read: THE POET IS WORKING.¹⁹⁸

Breton, of course, already believed, in 1924, in “the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory into a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*, if one may so speak.”¹⁹⁹ The key was discovering the methods for bringing about

¹⁹⁶ André Breton, “Discourse on the Paucity of Reality,” 25. This phrase bears an important relationship to the work of Aimé Césaire, whose *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* I will explore in some detail in the chapter that follows.

¹⁹⁷ André Breton, “Discourse on the Paucity of Reality,” 25.

¹⁹⁸ André Breton, “Manifesto of Surrealism,” 14.

¹⁹⁹ André Breton, “Manifesto of Surrealism,” 14.

such a resolution. Experiments in automatism were a first step; games, a rich and varied tradition of surrealist experimentation, were another. The exquisite corpse, the time traveller's potlatch, the games of definitions, conditionals, opposites, and syllogisms were all attempts to develop methodologies for achieving the resolution of dream world and waking world, mental exercises designed to be carried out in collective settings, using language as the primary tool.²⁰⁰

There were other games too, though, ones that perhaps came closer to attaining the materialist-anthropological epistemology of profane illumination that Walter Benjamin had highlighted. In his analysis of surrealism's materiality—the so-called surrealist “world of things”—Benjamin was quick to point out that *place* was a central preoccupation for the members of the movement: “At the center of this world of things stands the most dreamed-of of their objects, the city of Paris itself.”²⁰¹ Place *matters* in the surrealist world, but not in the way that one might expect, and perhaps not even in the way that the earliest surrealists themselves might have imagined. Benjamin cast surrealism as a quintessentially *urban* experience, seeing in Breton and Aragon's narrations of late-night spectral walks through the deserted streets of the Paris arcades an echo of his own preoccupation with Paris, the “capital of the nineteenth century,” as he called it in his 1939 prospectus for his delightful and maddening history in quotation, *The Arcades Project*, itself an attempt to write a surrealist-inflected materialist-anthropological history of the city.²⁰² And, to a certain extent, Benjamin was right: surrealism in 1929 was indelibly marked by the rapid changes in the urban landscape of the city of Paris under the legacy of Haussmannization.

²⁰⁰ It is worth reading Alastair Brotchie's delightful little book of *Surrealist Games*, published by Shambhala/Redstone Editions in 2001. Though diminutive in size, the book contains an extensive collection of games pioneered by the surrealists from the 1920s to the present day, divided into categories according to object and intent, and including copious examples of the various results achieved by surrealist players.

²⁰¹ Walter Benjamin, “Surrealism,” 211.

²⁰² See Walter Benjamin, “Paris: Capital of the Nineteenth Century,” in *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1999): 14–26.

Though Benjamin, like so many of scholars of surrealism, focuses on Breton's *Nadja* as an exemplar of surrealism's experience of the urban, it is Louis Aragon's *Paris Peasant*, "incomparable" but still found wanting in the realm of the profane illumination, that sets the tone for surrealism's later urban explorations.²⁰³ Written in 1924, *Paris Peasant* was a "modern mythology," simultaneously a meditation on the fetishization of progress—especially technological progress—and an attempt to write an experiential analysis of the city of Paris. Modernity presents an interesting challenge to the notion of myth; in modernity, Aragon argues, nature—the terrain of the mythological—begins to fall away, to be replaced by an increasingly mythologized technological landscape, dotted with the relics of human progress: gaslights, shop windows, moving cars, statues, and monuments. With every new boulevard constructed through the city of Paris, nature is further tamed and contained by the human world, further divested of its power and grandeur. Trees are replaced by buildings, mountains by motorways, stars by gas lamps, and man begins to mythologize the representation of his own progress as he had once mythologized nature. These are real objects, objects that were once perceived as well-defined concrete constructions, that have, over time, become mere abstractions of themselves. "My habits of thought have been so conditioned," Aragon writes "that today I find myself unable to place complete confidence in any notion I may have of the universe without first subjecting that notion to an abstract examination."²⁰⁴ The culprit here is, of course, reason and, by association, rationalism, which cannot "even begin to compare with knowledge perceptible by sense."²⁰⁵

Paris Peasant is, then, Aragon's attempt to learn, or re-learn, to see the world "in terms of what I see and touch," to create a "science of life open only to those who have no

²⁰³ As Benjamin writes, "This profane illumination did not always find the Surrealists equal to it, or to themselves, and the very writings that proclaim it most powerfully, Aragon's incomparable *Paysan de Paris* and Breton's *Nadja*, show very disturbing symptoms of deficiency" ("Surrealism," 208).

²⁰⁴ Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (Boston: Exact Change, 1994), 8.

²⁰⁵ Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, 9.

training in it. A living science which begets itself and makes away with itself.”²⁰⁶ Unlike other mythologies, which always seem to end in romances (the same could be said of Breton’s own investigations of the urban environs in *Nadja* and *Mad Love*), Aragon’s goal is to stay focused on the concreteness of the everyday environs in which he finds himself. His methodology is one of description:

I was seeking ... to use the accepted novel-form as the basis for the production of a new kind of novel that would break all the traditional rules governing the writing of fiction, one that would be neither a narrative (a story) nor a character study (a portrait), a novel that the critics would be obliged to approach empty-handed.... I adopted a descriptive tone.²⁰⁷

Not just description, then, but a narrative of sensory experience. At its simplest level, *Paris Peasant* is an epistemological project: an experiential analysis of urban life, presented through the eyes of a narrator who is both participant and observer at one and the same time. Interestingly, Aragon’s insistence on developing a body of knowledge based on his own sensory experience—as opposed to any external, absolute rational truth—is what necessitates the engaged-yet-disengaged position of the narrator that he assumes, a narrative position that will become increasingly important for surrealism over time, as we shall see in Part Two of the present work.

The object of Aragon’s descriptive experiment is a quintessentially Parisian site: “the covered arcades which abound in Paris in the vicinity of the main boulevards and which are rather disturbingly named *passages*, as though no one had the right to linger for more than an instant in those sunless corridors.”²⁰⁸ Originally constructed in the earliest years of the

²⁰⁶ Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, 9, 10.

²⁰⁷ Louis Aragon, quoted in Simon Watson Taylor, “Introduction,” to *Paris Peasant*, xi-xii.

²⁰⁸ Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, 13-14.

nineteenth century, and demolished less than 100 years later, the Paris arcades are, as Walter Benjamin discovered, perhaps *the* single greatest architectural metaphor for the century of progress, both engendered and endangered by the rise of modernity. The arcades represented some of the earliest attempts to use iron as an architectural material, vast halls constructed of iron and glass in a traditional Hellenic style badly suited to the materials at hand. Lined on both sides, and sometimes on multiple levels, with rows of shops largely dealing in textiles and luxury goods, the arcades were the progenitors of the modern shopping mall, both inside and outside, hidden from sight and yet on display, at the very same time. Their style was very much in keeping with medieval Paris—given over to narrow passages, irregular facades, and dark corners; Aragon will write at length about the darkness of the arcades.

Of course, medieval Paris didn't survive the nineteenth century, and the arcades, too, fell prey to the dawning of the Second Empire. Napoleon III took advantage of his almost unparalleled power in the earliest years of his reign to carry out a series of mass-scale architectural renovations, which would render the city almost unrecognizable in a matter of years. Over 60% of Paris's buildings were transformed in one way or another between 1853 and 1870, under the watchful eye of Napoleon's extravagant city planner, Georges-Eugène Haussmann. Baron Haussmann, as he is more commonly known, wanted to build a more rational city, one more easily navigable and appropriate for the new forms of transportation that were beginning to appear. Whereas old Paris had been a maze of small winding alleys lined with irregular and illogically placed buildings, easily navigable by foot, but difficult for streetcars to navigate, Haussmann's Paris was clean and geometric, divided along twelve massive boulevards that radiated outward from the Arc de Triomphe, providing clear lines

of sight, and streets too wide to easily barricade.²⁰⁹ The urban reforms provided the opportunity to modernize the city's infrastructure—new sewers were constructed, new utility and transportation lines laid—but required the demolition of massive swathes of the city, many of the buildings within which were taken through a process of expropriation, usually at a price far less than the building's actual value, and in most cases far less than the residents and shopkeepers required to make a new start in a different part of the city.

Most of the city's arcades were destroyed to make way for Haussmann's rational city, and new stores, hotels, and cafes were constructed along the broad promenades of the city's new boulevards, leaving the remaining arcades to slowly fade and disappear from view, forgotten relics of early modernity, displaced and disgraced by their late modern cousins. Though Haussmann was eventually removed from power in 1870, having spent 2.5 billion francs of the city's money over the course of 17 years, planners who followed in his wake would continue to carry out many of the city reforms he had begun.

It is in this context that Aragon chooses the arcades, and specifically the Passage de l'Opéra, as the setting for his modern mythology. Composed of three arcades, one along each side, and a second level running perpendicular to the two on the ground level, the Passage de l'Opéra was an especially good choice: it was the site of the Café Certa, an early haunt of the surrealists, and a passage frequented by Aragon and his friends for a number of years. Once a grand shopping arcade frequented by the city's leisure class, the Passage was, by 1924, largely frequented by drunks and prostitutes, its once-grand hotels gone to seed, its shops and cafes rarely patronized. It is the ideal site in which to exercise one's powers of seeing what is unseen, according to Aragon, who suggests that though "the life that originally quickened them has drained away, they deserve, nevertheless, to be regarded as the secret

²⁰⁹ We should not forget that Haussmann was not a city planner. He was a police prefect and a city administrator.

repositories of several modern myths.... [T]hey have at last become the true sanctuaries of a cult of the ephemeral, the ghostly landscape of damnable pleasures and professions.”²¹⁰

And indeed, the Passage that Aragon describes is not remarkable in any way:

The Petit Grillon [one of the cafés within the arcade] consists of two rooms, a fairly large one containing the bar, and a smaller boxlike room which used to be reserved for the sole use of our party when we arrived, six or seven strong, to play games, drink and talk. During the winter the second room is heated by a little gas radiator which is in constant danger of being knocked over. The customers of this café are regulars whom I’ve watched, year after year, come in and sit down at the same place.

There is absolutely nothing to distinguish them from the rest of mankind.²¹¹

The interactions he observes are fleeting and irrelevant, the buildings that he describes, the details he notices lack meaning. (Where does the door at the top of the stairs in the resident hotel lead? Does it really matter?²¹²) What matters here is the indescribable joy that Aragon finds in his description of these places and these people; he wants us to experience the Passage as he experiences it, to experience the pleasure of the qualities of the Marvelous which he finds in “everything base.”²¹³ It is precisely the fact of its unremarkability that makes the Passage so worthy of description, of observation, of exploration. It is simply the hidden side of everyday life in the Paris of late modernity.

Yet there is another reason that this particular Passage is of interest to Aragon. It is a place “that tomorrow will never know,”²¹⁴ one of the few surviving arcades that has now been scheduled for demolition to make way, irony of ironies, for the completion of the Boulevard Haussmann, leaving the passage filled with little more than the “seething fury

²¹⁰ Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, 14.

²¹¹ Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, 24.

²¹² Cf. Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, 17.

²¹³ Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, 37.

²¹⁴ Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, 14.

rightly felt by all the inhabitants of this place.”²¹⁵ It is yet another site where modernity has come full circle, a place that exists by virtue of that which seeks to destroy it, like the surrealists themselves, who are constantly in an uneasy tension with modernity, despite the fact that they are, unquestionably, inexorably, a modern movement. Aragon’s *Paris Peasant* gets directly at this contradiction—a peasant in Paris? A modern mythology? There is no such thing. The productivity is borne of the tension of these seemingly impossible juxtapositions. These condemned spaces, neither here nor there, neither fully alive nor fully destroyed, these are the spaces that fascinate the surrealists in Paris.

It would be short-sighted, then, to try to claim that surrealism, in its earliest incarnation, at least, is not a particularly, magnificently urban experience. The city figures into the surrealist world in a thousand different ways, and Aragon’s modern mythology is only a small representative sample of the ways in which the surrealists used their strategies of materialist-anthropological observation to explore the urban landscape.²¹⁶ In another sense, however, what Benjamin failed to realize—partially because of his own desire to inscribe surrealism within the contours of the city that he, himself, had become so singularly enchanted with, and partially because the surrealists themselves had yet to realize it—was

²¹⁵ Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, 25.

²¹⁶ Interestingly, Surrealism’s engagement with the urban terrain is as important, and as central to the movement’s theoretical development as is its engagement with the natural world—which seems almost a contradiction in terms. Yet the surrealists were some of the first to celebrate explicitly urban phenomena like sidewalk culture and graffiti. These interests and obsessions would be taken up in later years by Guy Debord and the members of the Situationist International, whose debt to surrealism is far greater than Debord himself was willing to acknowledge. The situationists were ultimately the ones who turned the notion of the urban drift—derive—into a methodological principle, focusing even greater theoretical attention of the epistemology of urban life as it was revealed through the series of random walks and chance encounters. We should remember, though, that the practice was one initially developed by the surrealists, and appropriated by the situationists, a source of some contention amongst the later members of both groups.

Though there was little actual contact between Debord and Breton—the latter was already quite advanced in years by the time the former had begun to develop his theoretical platform—Franklin and Penelope Rosemont spent an afternoon with Debord during their sojourn in Paris. The couple found the young situationist interesting, but limited by his own Marxist framework, as Penelope recalls, and unable to fully appreciate the core principles of surrealism. Despite that, the Chicago surrealists kept up a lively correspondence with members of the SI over the years, and some of the first translations of situationist texts were published in *The Rebel Worker* and other Chicago surrealist publications (Penelope Rosemont, personal conversation, 6-23-2013).

that surrealism wasn't really about the *urban* experience per se, at least, not as a core principle. In the midst of an increasingly industrialized Paris, what the surrealists wanted to explore was the way that the city acted upon its inhabitants, and the way that successive generations of collective existence faded into the dark recesses of the city's unseen passages, and then into memories, and then into nothing at all. The arcades—created by, and destroyed by modernity—provided the ideal setting for this kind of work, a mixture of participant-observation and historical preservation, both anthropological and materialist, as Benjamin pointed out.

Yet if we look back to Aragon's explanation of his project in *Paris Peasant*, we should pause for a moment at his methodological description of this "living science": it "begets itself," "makes away with itself."²¹⁷ For Aragon, in *Paris Peasant*, there is no reality, no city, that is fully external to the narrator's own experience. The city in Aragon's anti-novel is created by virtue of the fact that Aragon *experiences* it. The "concrete" is simply the *possible*, made manifest by an act of the imagination. Aragon's project, then, becomes interestingly specific and universal at the same time. On the one hand, there is a historical impulse—Aragon is driven by a desire to narrate the spaces of the Passage de l'Opéra in order to mark their passing, to concretize his own experience of these spaces, which are poised to fade into complete nonbeing as the construction of the Boulevard Haussmann forges ahead. On the other hand, though, there is a creative impulse—in narrating these spaces, in blending together Aragon's real encounters in the Passage with his imagined ones, he creates a new world, one that mixes dream and reality, past and present, into something wholly new, and tinged with the glimmers of the Marvelous. And, in fact, the Marvelous itself is *created*, is *brought into being*, in this instant, in the experience of bringing the dreamworld of the

²¹⁷ Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, 10.

imagination into contact with the starkness of the reality of the vice-world of the Passage.

“The marvelous is not the same in every period of history,” Breton had insisted in the first manifesto. “[I]t partakes in some obscure way of a sort of general revelation only the fragments of which come down to us: they are the romantic *ruins*, the modern *mannequin*, or any other symbol capable of affecting the human sensibility for a period of time.”²¹⁸ Like the Passage de l’Opéra itself, the surrealist world is one that is brought into being by the juxtaposition of bits and pieces drawn from the most unlikely of sources, brought (sometimes unwittingly) into a productive tension with other elements, and from that tension invested with a new significance. The truest surrealist accomplishment in the realm of observation is the uncanny ability to see order and unity in the midst of chaos. It is, perhaps, unsurprising that so many of the surrealists have taken collage as a central methodology, whether in the realm of language, image, or even history. The practice of collage, of turning bits and pieces of nothing into *something*, also has an interesting creative principle behind it, and one that has a deep significance for surrealism’s political and historical project.

In the “Second Manifesto of Surrealism,” amidst the discussion of the reconciliation of contradictions, the passionate declarations of surrealism in the service of the Revolution, and, curiously, one of his more sustained analyses of modern Marxism and party politics, Breton invokes the figure of the alchemist:

Alchemy of the word: this expression which we go around repeating more or less at random today demands to be taken literally.²¹⁹

The reference, of course, is to Arthur Rimbaud’s *Season in Hell*, perhaps one of the most important surrealist texts *avant la lettre*. In a section entitled “Alchemy of the Word,”

²¹⁸ André Breton, “Manifesto of Surrealism,” 16.

²¹⁹ André Breton, “Second Manifesto of Surrealism,” 173.

Rimbaud had woven a tale of madness and poetry, of intellectual travels and transgressions which were simultaneously wholly new and deeply imbued with the elements of the past, which had, as Breton was quick to point out in his second manifesto, become something of a guidepost for the “difficult undertaking”²²⁰ in which surrealism was engaged:

I dreamed up crusades, voyages of discovery that haven’t been recorded yet,
republics with no history, hushed-up religious wars, revolutions in folks customs,
displacements of nations and continents: I believed in all kinds of wizardry.

[...]

Out-dated poetic tricks played a big part in my alchemy of the word.²²¹

Breton acknowledges surrealism’s debt to Rimbaud’s early experiments in language, but concretizes and refines this notion of alchemical transformation as it relates to surrealism’s political engagement with the present, in a passage that is worth quoting at length:

Is the admirable fourteenth century any less great as regards human hope (and of course human despair) because a man of Flamel’s genius received from a mysterious power the manuscript, which already existed, of Abraham the Jew, or because the secrets of Hermes had not been completely lost? I do not believe so for one minute, and I think that Flamel’s efforts, with all of their appearance of concrete success, lose nothing by having been helped and anticipated. In our own time, everything comes to pass as though a few men had just been possessed, by supernatural means, of a singular volume resulting from the collaboration of Rimbaud, Lautréamont, and a few others, and that a voice said to them, as the angel said to Flamel, “Come, behold

²²⁰ André Breton, “Second Manifesto of Surrealism,” 173.

²²¹ Arthur Rimbaud, “Alchemy of the Word,” in *A Season in Hell/Une Saison en Enfer*, trans. Bertrand Mathieu (Rochester: BOA Editions, 1991), 35.

this book, look well, you will not understand a line in it, neither you nor many others, but you will one day see therein what no one could see.”... I would appreciate your noting the remarkable analogy, insofar as their goals are concerned, between the Surrealist efforts and those of the alchemists: the philosopher’s stone is nothing more or less than that which was to enable man’s imagination to take a stunning revenge on all things, which brings us once again after centuries of the mind’s domestication and insane resignation, to the attempt to liberate once and for all the imagination by the “long, immense, reasoned derangement of the senses,” and all the rest.²²²

The centrality of this enigmatic episode in the second manifesto is not immediately apparent, but let us linger upon it for a moment, and try to unpack the levels of meaning in Breton’s text. Immediately apparent is Breton’s desire to once again cast surrealism as the inheritor of a much longer tradition of revolutionary intellectual practice—Rimbaud and Lautréamont are invoked, as they have been in so many previous declarations by the Surrealists, but we should note here that Breton also links the Surrealist project to the alchemical tradition; that is, surrealism’s trajectory does not start with Rimbaud, nor with Lautréamont, but stretches back to Flamel, the alchemist in the fourteenth century, and *by virtue of Flamel’s story*, to Abraham the Jew, through whom the story continues to stretch back to Hermes.

It is undoubtedly true, as Kirsten Strom notes, that “the Surrealists appropriated historical figures as a strategy for validating and buttressing their own project.”²²³ Breton had begun the project of constructing a surrealist pre-history in the pages of the first manifesto, where he devotes an entire page to a list of (largely literary) figures with whom he senses an

²²² André Breton, “Second Manifesto of Surrealism,” p. 173-175.

²²³ Kirsten Strom, *Making History* (New York: University Press of America, 2002), 3.

immediate surrealist kinship: “Swift is Surrealist in malice; Sade is Surrealist in sadism; Chateaubriand is Surrealist in exoticism; Constant is Surrealist in politics; Hugo is Surrealist when he isn’t stupid;...”²²⁴ One has the sense, reading Breton, Aragon, Rosemont, Garon, and the other surrealists who cast themselves in the guise of historians over the course of their surrealist adventures, that the glimmers of a surrealist project were visible in almost everything they encountered. Yet the surrealist approach to history is more complex than a simplistic cataloguing of unlikely similarities in an otherwise disparate list of historical figures and events, and it has a special link to the alchemical tradition in its own uncanny way, which Breton hints at in the second manifesto.

At its most fundamental levels, surrealism is a set of transmutative practices aimed at turning our everyday, base reality into something wholly new, and infinitely more valuable. Where the alchemists sought gold and immortality, the surrealists sought the Marvelous in the everyday. Yet the Marvelous, as we must come to understand, isn’t a *thing* that one can simply *find* hidden under a rock, or in a dark corner. It is an experience of the world that must be created through a set of practices and principles—of liberation, of observation, of mad love and obsession, of exploration, of poetry and revolt—that are specific to the individual and the contexts within which individuals find themselves, both historical and geographic, while, at the same time, universalizing in the sense of linking the individual, in their specificity, to a larger tradition of transmutative experiments in the service of the Marvelous. As the alchemists would constantly revise their own history to adapt to new discoveries and to blot out old failures, the surrealists were engaged in the practice of the alchemical transformation of the present day, a process of continually rediscovering those moments, objects, individuals, and experiences lost to history, passed from collective

²²⁴ André Breton, “Manifesto of Surrealism,” 26-27.

memory, and imbuing them with a new significance, and, in so doing, changing and creating a new historical progression, with the present moment at the center of it all.

“[W]ho knows whether we are going to find ourselves at some future date faced with the necessity, in the light of some new evidence or not, of making use of some completely new objects, or objects considered completely obsolete?” Breton wondered in the second manifesto.²²⁵ The surrealists were charged with the responsibility of waiting—of keeping a watchful eye on the present—for precisely that moment at which to intervene, to shift the course of history, to *create* a new history, where only chaos and disjunction had been before.

²²⁵ André Breton, “Second Manifesto of Surrealism,” 175.

Part Two: Toward a Vernacular Surrealism

“One might perhaps say that [Césaire’s ‘truth unto itself’] is the history and politics of imperialism, of slavery, conquest, and domination freed by poetry, for a vision bearing on, if not delivering, true liberation.”

—Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*²²⁶

²²⁶ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York, Vintage, 1993), 281.

Chapter Five: Surrealism's Other America

Surrealism's historical project would change over the years, as the movement's primary context shifted with the onset of the second world war, and the fracturing of the group around Breton. Though the Paris surrealists would continue their revolutionary activities in exile outside the city once France fell to Vichy rule, the forced dissipation of the core nucleus of the Paris group changed the character and the composition of the French surrealist movement somewhat, and despite sustained and arguably more mature and productive surrealist activity in Paris in the years that followed the war, the centers of surrealist activity had begun to shift at the end of the 1930s, in part due to Breton's own discovery of pockets of indigenous surrealism²²⁷ elsewhere in the world. In the decades that followed the end of World War Two, Czechoslovakia (especially Prague, in what is now the Czech Republic), the French Caribbean (especially Haiti and Martinique), and the United States (especially Chicago) would all emerge as major surrealist centers, each boasting their own very specific homegrown version of surrealist praxis, while still sharing some characteristics, and often times direct links, with surrealism's early Parisian incarnations. Though surrealism in the Czech Republic presents a particularly important example of the movement's political priorities, it is to surrealism in the Americas, and in particular in the Caribbean and the United States, that I shall direct my analysis in the second half of this study.²²⁸

The progression of surrealism's political project—and its historical project, since the two are intimately related—is an interesting one, determined in large part by the movement's

²²⁷ See Chapter 7 for an in-depth discussion of the use of the word “indigenous” in this context.

²²⁸ It should be noted, however, that surrealism in the Czech Republic has a strong relationship to the sorts of anti-imperialist politics that would come to define surrealism in the Americas. Vincent Bounoure's *La civilisation surréaliste* (Paris: Payot, 1976) is one of the best sources for essays by the Czech surrealists on their relationship to revolutionary politics.

geographical spread. Present within surrealism's *élan vital*²²⁹ from the start was a certain emphasis on mobility, on motion; the surrealist world was always a world unfixed in time and place, or rather a world constantly vibrating on the boundary between past and present, dream and reality, waking and sleeping, and so on. Surrealism's central characters were never fixed in place or in identity: think of Breton's Nadja, drifting through the streets of Paris as she drifts in and out of lucidity; or of Aragon's nightwalker skulking through the winding streets of the Parisian underworld, narrating his path with an ever-growing collection of ephemera; or of Benjamin's *flâneur*, the ultimate participant-observer, and the example of modern subjectivity *par excellence*, as well as the lens through which Benjamin crafts his own surrealist-inflected history of the Parisian arcades.²³⁰

For Breton, Aragon, and Benjamin this figure of the drifter, the participant-observer never fully *in* the everyday world, yet never fully *removed* from it either, becomes an important narrative device, acting both as a plot device that moves the story along, often times literally driving the story's geography and movement, *and*, at the same time, as a storyteller in their own right, in Benjamin's sense of the term. In the surrealist narrative, every object these drifters touch, every scene they observe, every chance encounter itself becomes a part of the story, and the story changes by virtue of these encounters. And, not just objects fall within the scope of the surrealist narrative, but places, as well. Aragon and Benjamin re-enchant the Paris arcades with their unorthodox histories of the city and its structures—Benjamin's is perhaps more clearly and obviously a history, but Aragon, while eschewing all traditional forms of narrative and historiography, nonetheless manages to capture and refine the real history of Baron Haussmann's renovation of the city of Paris, by viewing it not through the

²²⁹ The term is Henri Bergson's. See, for reference, Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution* (New York: Dover, 1998).

²³⁰ The situationists would also adapt the notion of the participant-observer, seeking to foster a radical break from the spectacle of everyday capitalism by absorbing themselves in Paris' slums. James Clifford's article, "On Ethnographic Surrealism," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23.4 (1981) is particularly interesting on these ideas.

eyes of the city planners, the governmental architects, not even through the artists, but through the eyes of the shopkeepers whose stores were demolished to make way for the bold promenades that would come to define the Second Empire reforms. Indeed, this is Paris viewed from the corners, from the winding alleyways, the dark shadows frequented by the city's more "unseemly" elements, where the detritus and filth of urban life collects—exactly those places that the Baron Haussmann wished to destroy. In Aragon's piecemeal history, those shadows are preserved, celebrated, not forgotten, but instead called forth from the very brink of oblivion, and re-invested with a new political significance in the context of the then-present-day modernization of the Passage de l'Opera and beyond.

The surrealist landscape is filled with these unlikely histories of forgotten lands, both near and far from home, but a striking example is Aimé Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* (*Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*), a long-form poetic account of Césaire's discovery of *négritude*—the political subjectivity of blackness—originally published in book form in 1947 with a preface by André Breton. Breton and Césaire had met somewhat by chance in April of 1941, when Breton, *en route* to his "voluntary exile" in the United States, stopped in Martinique and stumbled across an issue of Césaire's journal, *Tropiques*.²³¹ Breton devotes several pages to this chance discovery in his 1943 essay, "A Great Black Poet":²³²

... apropos of buying a ribbon for my daughter, I happened to leaf through a periodical on display in the haberdashery where the ribbon was sold. It was, under an extremely unpretentious cover, the first issue of a review called *Tropiques*, which had just come out in Fort-de-France. Needless to say, knowing the extent to which ideas had been debased in the last year and not unfamiliar with the lack of scruples

²³¹ Annette Smith, "A Note on André Breton," in Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, trans. Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2001): viii.

²³² The essay is the same as the text published as the preface to the 1947 book edition of Césaire's poem.

characteristic of police reactions in Martinique [where Breton had spent the previous two nights in a detention camp in the Fort-de-France harbor, labeled as a “dangerous agitator”²³³], I approached this periodical with extreme diffidence.... I could not believe my eyes: For what was said there was what had to be said, and it was said in a manner not only as elegant but as elevated as anyone could say it! All the grimacing shadows were torn apart, scattered; all the lies, the mockery shredded: Thus the voice of man was in no way broken, suppressed—it sprang upright again like the very spike of light, *Aimé Césaire*, such was the name of the one who spoke.²³⁴

The haberdasher, it soon transpired, was the sister of René Ménil, who, along with Césaire, had founded the *Tropiques* group. An hour later, a meeting for the following evening had been set; Césaire, already familiar with the work of Breton and the surrealist group in Paris, was no doubt flattered by Breton’s interest: “Breton literally *fascinated* me. This was a man of extraordinary culture, with an *astonishing* sense of poetry,” he told an interviewer years later. “The encounter with Breton was for me a *very important* thing.... I encountered Breton at a crossroads; starting from that moment, my life was all sketched out—it was the end of hesitations.”²³⁵ The two great poets would continue to meet each evening throughout the remainder of Breton’s visit to the island. In the years that followed this chance discovery, Breton would champion Césaire and the work of the *Tropiques* group (including Suzanne Césaire, Aimé’s wife and one of surrealism’s sharpest, clearest theoretical innovators), publishing their words in his own journals, and bringing these Caribbean poets and revolutionaries into the fold of the international surrealist movement.

What was it about Césaire’s work that so captivated Breton? Why identify Césaire as

²³³ Cf. Franklin Rosemont’s “Introduction” to the first English translation of Breton’s *Charmeuse de Serpents* in André Breton, *Martinique: Snake Charmer*, ed. Franklin Rosemont (Austin: U of Texas P, 2004).

²³⁴ André Breton, “A Great Black Poet,” in Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, ix-x.

²³⁵ Franklin Rosemont, “Introduction,” in *Martinique: Snake Charmer*, 13.

a surrealist? Breton would write in his introduction to the *Notebook* that Césaire’s work represented “the first revivifying new breath capable of restoring confidence [in art] ... [Césaire] handles the French language in a way that no white man is capable of today.”²³⁶ The meeting between Breton and Césaire is, indeed, an important one, and even moreso in the context of this project, which seeks to trace the development of the surrealist vision of America. Césaire’s *Notebook* is an integral part of that story, and an investigation of this key work, and of Césaire’s personal history, helps us to understand what is at stake politically in the surrealist approach to the question of America.

According to Franklin Rosemont,²³⁷ the story of “Surrealism’s America” *really* begins in 1493, when Christopher Columbus charted the island we now call Martinique, some 700 miles southeast of Haiti, and 1,500 miles off the coast of Miami, Florida. Known today as the Antilles, the arc of islands between the tip of Haiti and the coast of Venezuela that surround Martinique make up a significant portion of the West Indies, first “discovered” by Columbus on his maiden voyage across the Atlantic in search of the vast riches of the Orient.²³⁸ As the story goes, Columbus, whose voyage had been bankrolled by the royal court of Spain, got the concept of a round Earth right, but failed to account for the possibility of another as-yet-undiscovered landmass to the west of Europe. In October of 1492, his fleet sailed directly into the midst of the Antillean Islands, and Columbus, assuming

²³⁶ André Breton, “A Great Black Poet,” xii.

²³⁷ Personal conversation, August 4, 2007, but see also the introduction to Franklin Rosemont and Robin DG Kelley, *Surrealism Black, Brown & Beige*.

²³⁸ In some sense or another, all stories of “America” start, of necessity, with Columbus. This account is deeply indebted to the influence of Howard Zinn’s magnificent *A People’s History of the United States, 1492-present*. Zinn’s project is a poignant historical corrective designed to tell the history of the US from the perspective of the people, not the state. “The history of any country, presented as the history of a family,” Zinn writes, “conceals fierce conflicts of interest (sometimes exploding, most often repressed) between conquerors and conquered, masters and slaves, capitalists and workers, dominators and dominated in race and sex. And in such a world of conflict, a world of victims and executioners, it is the job of thinking people, as Albert Camus suggested, not to be on the side of the executioners.” One might say that that the surrealists agreed: their histories are decidedly *not* told from the perspective of the executioners. See Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States* (New York: Harper, 1990): 1-22. The quote here is taken from p. 9-10.

he'd reached Asia, began his search for gold, spices, and silks, like the ones Marco Polo had recovered on his voyages to the Orient. In reality, of course, there were neither gold nor spices to be found on the islands of the Caribbean Sea, but Columbus and his men wreaked havoc upon the native populations of the islands, and sparked a centuries-long battle for territorial control over this new world.

Like the other Caribbean islands Columbus would visit on his four voyages to the “Indies” in search of spices, gold, and, eventually, slaves, Martinique was populated by the Arawak and Carib peoples, who were already at war with each other. Columbus visited the island for several days in January of 1502, but found the conditions too hostile (largely due to the massive population of snakes inhabiting the island, and the equally-dangerous and cannibalistic Caribs²³⁹) and left quickly. The island remained untouched by Europe’s colonial project until 1632, when an expedition led by Pierre Belain d’Estambuc of France took possession of Martinique and its neighboring island, Guadalupe, with the intention of developing settlements devoted to the growth and production of the highly-valued sugar cane. D’Estambuc’s nephew, Jacques Dyel du Parquet, the first governor of the island, made an agreement with the Caribs for the use of the land, but the French development pushed further and further outward, and threatened the Carib territory until open revolt broke out. The Carib were an advanced people in the realm of tribal warfare—by this point, they had largely dominated the island, killing or chasing off the male members of the peaceful Arawak tribes—but they were no match for the firearms of the French settlers. By 1657, the Caribs had been entirely exterminated from the island, thanks to the influx of 600 troops sent by

²³⁹ In reality, as Basil Reid writes, little to no conclusive evidence exists to demonstrate that the Caribs did, in fact, practice cannibalism, despite the fact that the English word “cannibal” is derived from the Carib word for “person.” While some records do exist of war rituals that include the consummation of human flesh, the Spaniards seem to have had a specifically economic motivation for portraying the Caribs as cannibals in general, one which was related to the Queen of Spain’s proclamation that only those individuals who would be “better off” under slavery could be taken as slaves. See Basil Reid, *Myths and Realities of Caribbean History* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2009).

the French crown to gain control of the island once and for all.

The three centuries that followed would see battles to maintain French dominance over the islands of the Lesser Antilles. The British gained control of Martinique on numerous occasions, most notably during the Napoleonic Wars in 1800 and again in 1809, and during the Seven Years War, some forty years earlier. The resolution of the Seven Years War demonstrated just how valuable these islands had become: at the signing of the 1763 Treaty of Paris (which ended the war), France agreed to give up all of Canada to regain control of Martinique and Guadalupe. The Antilles may have been small, but their value as sugar and coffee producing lands was enormous. The island remained a colony of France until 1946, when it was transformed into an overseas department (a transformation that the young Césaire played a key role in, and one that he would later harshly criticize when the promises of departmentalization fell flat²⁴⁰).

The production of sugar cane is a labor-intensive process; as the French settlers began to realize that their labor deficit was not going to be filled by the native peoples of the West Indies, they turned instead to indentured servants from mainland France, and to black slaves largely captured in and around Senegal on the West African coast. Louis XIV had permitted for the import of black slaves to the island in 1642. By the 1680s, black slaves outnumbered the free whites by a growing margin. By the time slavery was outlawed across all of France's considerable territory in 1848, a deep and intense process of the intermingling of black and French culture was well underway. The post-slavery black population of Martinique was a largely creole society: the two very distinct cultures of West Africa and mainland France muddled together over the course of centuries to form a new culture, a new cultural identity, that retained elements of each.

²⁴⁰ Robin DG Kelley, "A Poetics of Anticolonialism," *Monthly Review* 51.6 (November 1999). Available online at <http://monthlyreview.org/1999/11/01/a-poetics-of-anticolonialism> (accessed 12/12/2012).

It is into this largely creolized culture that Aimé Césaire was born in 1913, and it is this culture that he addresses in the *Notebook*. Césaire's family was solidly working-class: his mother was a dressmaker, his father a tax inspector in Basse-Point, a town at the north-eastern tip of the island.²⁴¹ From these humble beginnings, Césaire quickly distinguished himself through his intellectual abilities, so much so his family eventually moved to the capital city of Fort-de-France so as to provide the the young Aimé with the opportunity to study at the prestigious Lycee Schoelcher. At the age of 18, he received a scholarship that allowed him to travel to Paris for the first time, to attend the Lycée Louis-le-Grand where he would study for the grueling entrance exams to the famed École Normale Supérieure—an opportunity to visit the so-called “mother country” that Aimé had awaited impatiently for many years. “I was not at ease in the Antillean world,” he would state years later.²⁴² Yet his eight-year sojourn in Paris would teach the young poet that France was no more comfortable of a home for the black Antilleans.

By the time Césaire left Fort-de-France for Paris in 1931, he had internalized the French colonial identity, although he recognized the futility of the “colored petit-bourgeois” and their “fundamental tendency to ape Europe.”²⁴³ Despite its status as a colony, the Martinique of the 1930s was *fiercely French* in its self-identification. Césaire, uneasy in the Antillean world, went to Paris with the expectation of being received as a Frenchman; instead, he was received as *nègre*. Growing up in Basse-Pointe, Césaire had come into contact with prejudice, and he understood what racism was. But Martinique had been a largely sheltered environment where the question of race was concerned. The Antillean blacks

²⁴¹ I am deeply indebted here to Robin DG Kelley's discussion of Césaire's history in “A Poetics of Anticolonialism.”

²⁴² A. James Arnold, *Modernism and Négritude: The Poetry and Poetics of Aimé Césaire* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1981), 8.

²⁴³ Quoted in Souleymane Diagne, “Négritude,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2010), available online at <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2010/entries/negritude/> (accessed 10-17-12).

prided themselves on their French creole culture; they set themselves apart from the American blacks, and especially from the Africans, whom they cast as largely uncivilized.²⁴⁴ Césaire's first-hand encounters with the racism of mainland France—the presumed mother country of the French Antilles—were humiliating, to say the least. Yet these early experiences provided the catalyst for Césaire's greatest theoretical accomplishment: the concept of *négritude*.

Though the idea of *négritude* had arguably existed for many years before Césaire would give it a name,²⁴⁵ it was his experience in the student circles of the African diaspora in Paris that would lead Césaire to coin the term, an act defiant in and of itself. If, today, we understand the recuperation of the pejorative English word “nigger” into the everyday slang of black youth as a statement of power, an attempt to divest the insult of its performative power, we have to understand Césaire's use of “*négritude*” in similar (though not identical) terms: it was intended to both act and sound like a provocation.²⁴⁶ “Because Antilleans were ashamed of being Negroes, they searched for all sorts of euphemisms ... they would say man of color, dark-complexioned man, and other idiocies like that,” he told the Haitian poet and militant René Depestre in 1978, suggesting that the adoption of the word *nègre* (derived from the Latin “niger” meaning “black,” but rarely used apart from the weight of French racism) as a resistance to the assimilationist trends Césaire and other black students

²⁴⁴ Césaire frequently discussed the humiliation that the West Indian blacks felt at being associated with African blacks. In an interview with Françoise Vergès, he recalls a conversation with a “snobbish” Antillean, who begged the poet to stop associating the islands with the people of the African continent, saying “they are savages, we are different.” Quoted in Aimé Césaire, *Nègre je suis nègre je resterai. Entretiens avec Françoise Vergès* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2005), 28.

²⁴⁵ Especially in the work of other intellectuals of the African diaspora, most notably the Haitian anthropologist Anténor Firmin, whose searing *De l'Égalité des Races Humaine* had been written in response to Arthur de Gobineau's highly racist *Essai sur l'inégalité des Races Humaines* (infamous for its suggestion that all history stems from the contact of nations of color with the white races). The joint influence of Haiti and the authors of the Harlem Renaissance would form the underpinnings for Césaire's formulation of *négritude*.

²⁴⁶ Decades later, Césaire would lament his choice of words: “...I confess that I do not always like the word *Négritude* even if I am the one, with the complicity of a few others, who contributed to its invention and its launching,” though he added “it corresponds to an evident reality and, in any case to a need that appears to be a deep one” (Césaire lecturing in 1978, cited in Souleymane, Diagne, “*Négritude*,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (accessed 11-21-12).

perceived in the African diaspora.

We adopted *nègre* ... as a term of defiance.... Since there was shame about the word *nègre*, we chose the word *nègre* ... and then I took the liberty of speaking about *négritude*. There was in us a defiant will, and we found a violent affirmation in the words *nègre* and *négritude*.²⁴⁷

The “we” in Césaire’s description above refers to the group around the periodical *L’Etudiant noir*, founded in 1934 by the grand triumvirate of Césaire, Léon Damas, and Léopold Senghor. Damas and Césaire had known each other before moving to Paris; Damas had grown up on the neighboring island of Guiana, and had studied alongside Césaire at the Lycée Schoelcher in Fort-de-France. Senghor, from Senegal, had already completed three years of study at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand when Césaire arrived at the school, but the two formed a fast and long-lasting (if not always smooth) friendship that would continue well after the two men returned to their respective native homes in the years that followed.²⁴⁸

The camaraderie between Senghor and Césaire represented an important connection between Africa and the African diaspora. The *L’Etudiant noir* group was formed with the explicit intention of calling attention to the hypocrisy of the assimilationist tendencies within the West Indian student community in Paris, which centered largely around two other journals, *La revue du Monde Noir* and *Légitime défense*. The first, founded in 1931, had grown out of the literary community around the Nardal sisters, Paulette and Jane, proprietresses of the Clamart Salon, a tea-shop favorite amongst the black intelligentsia in Paris. The Nardal

²⁴⁷ René Depestre and Aimé Césaire, “Interview,” in Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review, 1972), 74.

²⁴⁸ Worth noting is the fact that both men would go on to play important roles of state in their respective countries. Senghor served as Senegal’s first president after the nation won its independence from France in 1960. Césaire would become mayor of the city of Fort-de-France in 1945, and play an important role in the instatement of Martinique as an overseas department of the French republic. In his later years, Césaire would regret this move towards departmentalization, saying, “The black man must be liberated, but he must also be liberated from the liberator” (Aimé Césaire, *Nègre je suis, nègre je resterai* [Paris: Albin Michel, 2005]).

sisters are widely credited with bringing the writers of the Harlem Renaissance, especially Claude McKay, into contact with the West Indian community in France. Césaire and Senghor occasionally travelled in this circle—the Nardal sisters were also from the island of Martinique—but found it to be too bourgeois. The group around *Légitime défense*, on the other hand, was deemed too assimilationist in their politics. Largely composed of poets, including the West Indian poets Etienne Lero, René Ménil, Jules Monnerot, and Simone Yoyotte, *Légitime défense* was intended to bring surrealism into resonance with French communism. Césaire was sympathetic to both the surrealists (whose work he read with great enthusiasm, even in his early years in Paris) and the communists,²⁴⁹ but *Légitime défense* left him cold. He would later say of this group of young poets, “They were Communists, and therefore we supported them. But very soon I had to reproach them—and perhaps I owe this to Senghor—for being French Communists. There was nothing to distinguish them either from the French surrealists or the French Communists. In other words, their poems were colorless.”²⁵⁰ What separated the group around Césaire and Senghor from the others was explicitly *la question Nègre*, the “Negro question”:

At that time, I criticized the Communists for forgetting our Negro characteristics. They acted like Communists, which was all right, but they acted like abstract Communists. I maintained that the political question could not do away with out condition as Negroes. We are Negroes, with a great number of historical peculiarities.²⁵¹

These “historical peculiarities” are precisely what Césaire addresses in his *Notebook*, where

²⁴⁹ It was with the support of the French Communist Party that Césaire won the mayor’s seat in Fort-de-France. He would remain a member of the PCF until Russia’s suppression of the Hungarian revolution in 1956.

²⁵⁰ René Depestre and Aimé Césaire, “Interview,” 69.

²⁵¹ René Depestre and Aimé Césaire, “Interview,” 69.

the concept of *négritude* would have its first full exploration.²⁵² As the story goes, Césaire, who had recently (and successfully) completed his entrance exams for the École Normale Supérieure —exams which required him to spend days on end absorbing the highest elements of French culture, understanding the most minute details of French cultural history—took a short vacation to Yugoslavia with another student, Petar Guberina. Gazing out over the Adriatic Coast, Césaire noticed a small island in the distance and, overcome by memories of his childhood (how very Proustian), he was moved to spend half the night composing a long poem about his homeland. “The next morning when he inquired about the little island,” Robin DG Kelley writes, “he was told it was called Martinska.”²⁵³ The timing here is uncertain. Kelley suggests that Césaire visited Yugoslavia in the summer of 1935, immediately after having completed his entrance exams; other Césaire scholars suggest that the trip took place in 1936, after Césaire had begun his studies at the École Normale Supérieure.²⁵⁴ Confusion and debate over the exact timing of the poem’s initial composition aside, what *is* certain is that these lines penned in response to the sight of the island of Martinska would form the basis for the *Notebook*. Interestingly, Césaire appears to have completed the poem in France, after a visit to Martinique the following year.²⁵⁵ What began as an ode to Césaire’s “native land”—“the land, the people, the majesty of the place”—took a decidedly drastic turn towards alienation after Césaire’s visit to Martinique and his

²⁵² Kelley claims that the first *use* of the term within Césaire’s circles is in an essay against assimilation, written by Césaire, and published in 1935 in *L’Étudiant noir*. The essay in question, “Nègreries: jeunesse noire et assimilation,” is, indeed, a call “for a sharp and complete break with Western civilization and with the assimilation espoused by the elders,” intended to emphasize “self-definition [of the] ‘Negro youth,’” but Césaire, in fact, does not actually *use* the term *négritude* in this essay, despite the clear relationship between this early piece of writing—Césaire’s first published work—and the concept as it is developed in the *Notebook*. See Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2003), p. 180, and pp. 179-186 *passim*.

²⁵³ Robin DG Kelley, “A Poetics of Anticolonialism.” This essay would later become the introduction to the Monthly Review Press edition of Césaire’s *Discourse on Colonialism*, which has become the standard English-language edition of this important book.

²⁵⁴ See, for example, the timeline in the Wesleyan University Press edition of *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, constructed by Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith. Eshleman and Smith put Césaire’s trip to Yugoslavia in 1936, though they offer less detail than Kelley does.

²⁵⁵ Cf. Robin DG Kelley, “A Poetics of Anticolonialism.”

subsequent return to Paris.²⁵⁶ As it turned out, Thomas Wolfe was right: you can't go home again.

The *Notebook* begins with a description of a ride through a blighted, abandoned, desolate, and desperate Martinique:

At the end of daybreak, this town sprawled-flat, toppled from its common sense, inert, winded under its geometric weight of an eternally renewed cross, indocile to its fate, mute, vexed no matter what, incapable of growing with the juice of this earth, self-conscious, clipped, reduced, in breach of flora and fauna.

At the end of daybreak, this town sprawled-flat ...²⁵⁷

It is a far cry from Césaire's original impetus upon seeing the island of Martinique to write about the "the majesty" of his native land. Haunted by the experience of a return home after living abroad for five years, now colored by the French perception of the African diaspora as *nègre*, Césaire narrates his journey back to a Martinique divested of her majesty. A broken and vanquished Martinique. A colonized Martinique.

And in this inert town, this squalling throng so astonishingly detoured from its cry as this town as been from its movement, from its meaning, not even worried, detoured from its true cry, the only cry you would have wanted to hear because you feel it alone belongs to this town; because you feel it lives in some deep refuge and pride in this inert town, this throng detoured from its cry of hunger, of poverty, of revolt, of hatred, this throng so strangely chattering and mute.²⁵⁸

With each passing line, the narrator grows more desperate to recapture the joy he once felt in walking among the winding roads dotted with houses, but that joy has long since passed.

²⁵⁶ Robin DG Kelley, "A Poetics of Anticolonialism."

²⁵⁷ Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, 2.

²⁵⁸ Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, 3.

Even his childhood home, once thought of as warm and safe, now “harbors in its guts of rotten wood dozens of rats and the turbulence of my six brothers and sisters, a cruel little house....”²⁵⁹ These early pages of the poem are complex and intricately layered—Césaire’s description of Martinique alternates between three different perspectives: his own, that of the assimilated black, and that of the French oppressor. He begins writing first as himself, the native son, the young man returning home for the first time after a lengthy absence, only to find that the reality of life in Martinique is far removed from those rosy memories of childhood he had taken away with himself:

...[T]his joy of former times making me aware of my present poverty, a bumpy road plunging into a hollow where it scatters a few shacks ... a road foolishly climbing, recklessly descending, and the carcass of wood which I call “our house,” comically perched on minute cement paws, its coiffure of corrugated iron in the sun like a skin laid out to dry....

At the end of daybreak, this most essential land restored to my gourmandize, not in diffuse tenderness, but the tormented sensual concentration of the fat tits of the mornes with an occasional palm tree as their hardened sprout....²⁶⁰

The reader asks herself, what has happened here? A war? A great plague or famine? No, it is simply the ravages of time, the cracks in the veneer of innocence that come with greater exposure to the world, with greater knowledge and understanding. Césaire’s vision of his native land is also colored by his experience of French racism: he cannot help but see Martinique—and the people who live there—through the eyes of the white colonial French whose language, culture, and history, he has spent the past five years immersing himself within. “Behind this floral design [of the siren-like call of the island],” Breton writes in his

²⁵⁹ Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, 10.

²⁶⁰ Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, 6-7.

description of the *Notebook*, “there is the wretchedness of a colonized people, their shameless exploitation by a handful of parasites in defiance of the very laws of their mother country and without any qualms about dishonoring it.”²⁶¹ Indeed, Césaire’s language in the *Notebook*, his choice of words, his inflection and intonation channels the disgust for the colonized subject that the French settlers must have felt as they subjugated and colonized the slaves on the sugar plantations of Martinique, that Césaire found directed at himself, and at all blacks, so acutely during his time in Paris:

This throng which does not know how to throng, this throng, so perfectly alone
under the sun ... like the sudden grave animality of a peasant, urinating standing, her
legs parted, stiff.²⁶²

This is nowhere as clear as when, much later in the poem, he describes his encounter with an old man on a streetcar, a passage worth quoting at length for its excruciating detail:

One evening on the streetcar facing me, a nigger.

A nigger as big as a pongo trying to make himself small on the street-car bench. He was trying to leave behind, on this grimy bench, his gigantic legs and his trembling famished boxer hands. And everything has left him, was leaving him. His nose, which looked like a drifting peninsula and even his négritude discolored as a result of untiring tawing. And the tawer was Poverty. A big unexpected lop-eared bat whose claw marks in his face had scabbed over into crusty islands. Or rather, Poverty was, like a tireless worker, laboring on some hideous cartouche. One could easily see how that industrious and malevolent thumb had kneaded bumps into his brow, bored two bizarre parallel tunnels in his nose, overexaggerated his lips, and in a masterpiece of caricature, planed, polished and varnished the tiniest cutest little ear in all creation.

²⁶¹ André Breton, “A Great Black Poet,” xvi.

²⁶² Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, 3.

He was a gangly nigger without rhyme or measure.

A nigger whose eyes rolled a bloodshot weariness.

A shameless nigger and his toes sneered in a rather stinking way at the bottom of the yawning lair of his shoes.

[...]

And the whole thing added up to a perfectly hideous nigger, a grouchy nigger, a melancholy nigger, a slouched nigger, his hand joined in prayer on a knobbly stick. A nigger shrouded in an old threadbare coat. A comical and ugly nigger, with some women behind me sneering at him.

He was COMICAL AND UGLY,

COMICAL AND UGLY for sure.

I displayed a big complicitous smile ...

My cowardice rediscovered!

Hail to the three centuries which uphold my civil rights and my minimized blood.

My heroism, what a farce.

This town suits me to a t.²⁶³

Césaire's journey, his return to the "native land," is also a journey through the process of assimilation, the "three centuries" of Martinique's colonization, creolization, and assimilation. Its stanzas are tinged with pain, with loss, and with horror at the revelation of the author's own assimilation, embedded so deeply within his own self-consciousness that Césaire must literally *unmake* himself to fully overcome the revulsion he feels at the sight of the poor "nigger" on the bus, a representative sample of the black mass that populates the island, in the eyes of the French, anyway. As narrator, Césaire places himself, in the early

²⁶³ Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, 29-30.

pages of the poem, in the position of a white Frenchman visiting the island, perhaps even for the first time, experiencing the same emotions—pity, disgust—that he imagines they might feel, describing the scenes before him in the language of the oppressor.

This last point is an important one: we should not forget that Breton's interest in Césaire's poetic spirit was, in part, due to the latter's ability to "handle the French language in a manner that no white man is capable of today," to "[break] violently with the modes of thinking and feeling that eventually render his existence impossible."²⁶⁴ In this context, Césaire's (somewhat voluntary, somewhat involuntary) assumption of the voice of the white colonizer in the *Notebook's* early descriptions of Martinique represents an important step in this process. Césaire doesn't just represent the thoughts and feelings of the colonizer, he becomes complicit in the process of colonization as he experiences assimilation at an accelerated rate, narrating the process of his own identity becoming subsumed, diminished, and ultimately all-but-destroyed by the imposition of the French language, the French culture, the French identity onto his own language, culture, and identity.

In true surrealist fashion, though, and Breton was quick to pick up on this most salient of points, it is through the process of negation that Césaire derives his greatest power, both linguistically and politically.²⁶⁵ "[A] poetry worth of its name is measured by the degree of abstention, of *refusal*, it implies, and that negative component of its nature must be maintained as essential," Breton wrote, and "[i]n this respect, Césaire is one of the most demanding poets."²⁶⁶ Césaire, never at ease in the Antillean world, critical of the West Indians who distinguished themselves from the savagery of the Africans and the enslavement of the American negroes, disillusioned by the desire to be seen as *French*, must

²⁶⁴ André Breton, "A Great Black Poet," xii, xiii.

²⁶⁵ The Hegelian impulse is always at work in surrealist practice. See Franklin Rosemont's "Introduction" to *What Is Surrealism?* for a particularly rich discussion of the influence of Hegelian dialectics on surrealism. Martin Jay touches briefly on Breton's affection for Hegel in his *Marxism and Totality* (1984).

²⁶⁶ André Breton, "A Great Black Poet," xiv.

first accept the assimilated identity—really, truly experience it—before he can reject it. So too must he accept—and experience—the process of colonization from the perspective of the colonizer before he can negate it, before he can divest it of its power over him, and over the popular perception of Martinique. Breton will explicitly describe this process as one of *transmutation*, making the critical link to surrealism’s historical practice:

[T]he value of Césaire’s poetry, as with all great poetry and all great art, rests principally in the power of transmutation that it brings into play: namely, in turning the most discredited materials, including even ugliness and servitude, into not just gold or the philosophic stone but into freedom itself.²⁶⁷

We should recall that, in the surrealist world, language took primacy as a site of experimentation and, at times, contestation with the tired rationality of mainstream French culture and politics. Surrealist automatism was, at its heart, a process of transformation: the process of automatic writing—writing in a manner that allowed the subject to free him or herself from the learned logic of grammar, meaning, and beyond—was intended to transform the writer as much as it transformed the language itself. It was a way to harness that latent, productive power of language that both Breton and Benjamin sensed, but were never quite able to capture, at least not in any sustained fashion. Unable to ever *really* and *truly* free themselves from the constraints of meaning in their waking lives, the French surrealists relied on their experiments with automatism, with dreaming, with humor, fright, shock, intentional confusion, drugs, madness, passion, and any other of a plethora of methods that constituted enough of a break with the waking, rational world that they were able to project themselves into that mental space *beyond* rationality where the true secrets of the magical surrealist art lay.

²⁶⁷ André Breton, “A Great Black Poet,” xv.

Yet Césaire had managed to accomplish this with the simple act of a return home. Perhaps it was because Césaire's mother tongue was already a creolized French; perhaps it was because he had gained mastery over the French language, literature, and culture as a student at the École Normal Supérieur, embraced it, allowed it to infect his conscious and unconscious mind, and then forcefully renounced it. Whatever the reason, it was Césaire's ability to break ties with the French language *in the process of recovering himself* that enabled him to "[handle] the French language in a way no white man is capable of today."²⁶⁸ Where the French surrealists sought a radical break, a sudden transformation in their own being as a way of glimpsing that truth that lay just beyond the rational realm, Césaire's poem is the narration of a man coming ever more into his own being, traversing the pathways of history in search of his own true identity. And thus, despite the fact that the *Notebook* is different in form than other examples of surrealist poetry, despite its *concreteness*, despite the fact that it "is a poem 'with a theme,' if not 'a thesis,'" for Breton, Césaire's mastery of the transmutative properties of poetry exemplifies the aims of surrealism.²⁶⁹

There is also an important universalizing aspect to this experience. Recalling his decision to leave Martinique as a teenager to travel abroad, and his expectations for his return, Césaire's narrator says, "To go away. My heart was pounding with emphatic generosities. To go away ... I would arrive sleek and young in this land of mine and I would say to this land whose loam is part of my flesh, 'I have wandered for a long time and I am coming back to the deserted hideousness of your sores.'"²⁷⁰

Indeed, the narrator, now educated, worldly, granted new resources and abilities after his sojourn in France, sees for himself a task: "Embrace me without fear ... And if all I can

²⁶⁸ André Breton, "A Great Black Poet," xii.

²⁶⁹ André Breton, "A Great Black Poet," xiv-xv.

²⁷⁰ Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, 13.

do is speak, it is for you I shall speak.[...] My mouth shall be the mouth of those calamities that have no mouth, my voice the freedom of those who break down in the prison holes of despair.”²⁷¹ Césaire here invests the poet with a revolutionary significance—it is the poet’s role not just to tell the stories of his or her own land, not just to act as a voice for the voiceless, but to rescue the voiceless from the very brink of oblivion. Interestingly, though, we must ask ourselves exactly who Césaire sees the poet as speaking on behalf of: the poor? Certainly, and the downtrodden, the visibly oppressed as well. But, at the same time, Césaire sees *all* of assimilated Martinique as voiceless—its true identity hidden away, buried under the detritus of centuries of colonization, in danger of slipping away entirely. It is *this* voice that Césaire’s poet is charged with the task of recovering.

At the same time Césaire’s narrator also realizes the danger of disengagement that accompanies this position as voice, as medium through which the words of the voiceless would flow:

And on the way, I would say to myself:

“And above all, my body as well as my soul, beware of assuming the sterile attitude of a spectator, for life is not a spectacle, a sea of miseries is not a proscenium, a man screaming is not a dancing bear ...”

And behold here I am!

[...]

I have no right to measure life by my sooty finger span; to reduce myself to this little ellipsoidal nothing trembling four fingers above the line, I am man, to so overturn creation that I include myself between latitude and longitude!

At the end of daybreak

²⁷¹ Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, 13.

the male thirst and the desire stubborn,

here I am, severed from the cool oases of brotherhood [...].²⁷²

Like Breton and the other French surrealists, Césaire wasn't interested in exteriority. His narrator was essentially useless if he spoke from outside the people on whose behalf he claimed to speak. Rather, what mattered here was *interiority*, or "insularity," as Breton might have called it, the narrator's ability to fully embody the consciousness of the oppressed while, at the same time, not losing sight of the world outside. After all, Césaire's narrator argued, it was their inability to see beyond the world in front of them that furthered the oppression of the assimilated people; freedom meant getting outside of the narrow confines of the French-imposed norms of civility and society, yet doing so in a way that did not disavow that history, did not disavow the ancestral heritage of the Antillean blacks. Césaire's narrator had to bring together the inside and the outside—the colonizer and the colonized—if he was going to chart a wholly new course for the history of the Antilleans.

Thus, we must understand that the "native land" in Césaire's poem is not just the Martinique he visited in 1937. The native land—*le pays natal*—is here something much greater and far less determinate than the very real contours of the island of Martinique, and the *Notebook* charts a rather "special geography; the world map made for my own use, not tinted with the arbitrary colors of scholars, but with the geometry of my spilled blood."²⁷³ Césaire's choice of images here—his reference to "geography," and to the arbitrariness of lines on a map—very clearly recalls the earliest inklings of a political project within the surrealist movement. Though his aim is different, and the context very clearly defined, Césaire's project here is not unlike the surrealist impulse in 1925 to define an epistemological trajectory that would encompass both Breton and his colleagues in Paris and the Berber

²⁷² Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, 14-15.

²⁷³ Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, 43.

revolutionaries in Morocco. Césaire’s “return” here is to a point already far beyond the lived experience of his immediate past, more than a return to a time (as in the *mémoire involontaire* that had, perhaps, prompted the original composition of the poem) or a place; it is a return to a shared history, a collective of subjectivities melded together into a unitary, irreducible experience that defines the author.²⁷⁴ The return to the native land is, itself, the discovery of *négritude*.

In his return to the native land, Césaire comes to terms with his own blackness, and reclaims—in fact celebrates—the weight of the black experience throughout history, a process that had already begun under the auspices of his collaboration with Senghor (an African black). The *Notebook* teems with examples that meld Césaire’s experience as a free, though colonized, black Antillean and the experience of his ancestors (who, after all, were indeed *not* native inhabitants of Martinique, but rather Africans captured, enslaved, and brought to the Americas to work on the sugar plantations) together with the experience of black slaves in North America and elsewhere. “What is mine,” he writes, describing the process of discovery of the brotherhood between the blacks of the two Americas, “these few thousand deathbearers who mill in the calabash of an island and mine too, the archipelago arched with an anguished desire to negate itself, as if from maternal anxiety to protect this impossibly delicate tenuity separating one America from another.”²⁷⁵

Breton hones in on this notion of a collective experience at the heart of Césaire’s idea of *négritude*:

Behind all of this, only a few generations back, there is slavery and here the wound reopens, yawning with the entire width of a lost Africa, with ancestral memories of

²⁷⁴ In this, we should see immediately the relationship with Walter Benjamin’s historian, whose past is always a return to a point far beyond the original moment in time. Cf. Michael Löwy’s discussion of Benjamin’s “On the Concept of History” in *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin’s “On the Concept of History”* (London: Verso, 2006).

²⁷⁵ Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, 15.

abominable tortures, with the awareness of a monstrous and forever irreparable denial of justice inflicted upon an entire collectivity. A collectivity to which the returning poet belongs body and soul, as enriched as he may have been by all of the teachings of the white world and thereby at that moment all the more torn.²⁷⁶

Césaire's *return*, then, is to a point more originary, more fundamental than any one nation or point in time. It is the return to the shared experience of blackness that ties together the African diaspora, carried to the far corners of the globe by the European slave ships which ravaged the African coasts in search of laborers to carry out their process of imperial expansion.

[A]nd these loins which secrete for Europe the hearty liquor of a Gulf Stream, and one of the two slopes of incandescence between which the Equator tightrope-walks toward Africa. And my non-fence island, its brave audacity standing at the stern of this Polynesia, before it, Guadeloupe, split in two down its dorsal line and equal poverty to us, Haiti where *négritude* rose for the first time and stated that it believed in its humanity and the funny little tail of Florida where the strangulation of a nigger is being completed, and Africa gigantically caterpillaring up to the Hispanic foot of Europe, its nakedness where death scythes widely.²⁷⁷

It is no accident that Césaire locates the first awakenings of *négritude* in Haiti. It was in Haiti, in 1791, that Toussaint Louverture led the first successful slave rebellion in European history. It was in Haiti that the enslaved blacks first carried out this process of negation, of decolonization first of their own minds, and then of their own lands, that Césaire attempts in the pages of the *Notebook*. At the end of their 1802 War of Independence, the Haitian revolutionaries refused France's offer of citizenship, demanding instead total independence

²⁷⁶ André Breton, "A Great Black Poet," xvi.

²⁷⁷ Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, 15.

from the French empire. Toussaint was never constrained by a desire for “equal” status with the French, and therein lay his power—he refused to assimilate, and this refusal eventually carried the Haitian people to their victory of independence—though even after its independence had been won, Haiti struggled to remain truly free of the influence of French banks.²⁷⁸ “Haiti,” Césaire would later claim, “is the country where Negro people stood up for the first time, affirming their determination to shape a new world.”²⁷⁹

Haiti, then, was both the beginning and the end of the story. Just as Breton had done in 1924 Surrealist Manifesto, Césaire draws together a disparate collection of figures and events, creating a historical constellation that brings the black experience across the diaspora together into an uneasy, but productive, tension. The goal here is not to *reduce* difference; Césaire doesn’t go so far as to claim that the specificity of historical context is meaningless. But he does suggest that there is an experiential line that draws these people and events together, and the wanderings of his narrator across the planes of history, through the annals of slavery and racial oppression, trace out a web of uncanny relationships at the center of which we might locate the now-emergent concept of *négritude*.

I say to myself Bordeaux and Nantes and Liverpool and New York and San
Francisco

not an inch of this world devoid of my fingerprint [...]

Virginia, Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama

Monstrous putrefaction of revolts [...]

²⁷⁸ Césaire, of course, would fail to uphold this same demand in his negotiations with the French government as a member of the French National Assembly for Martinique. Césaire’s pragmatic 1946 approach to liberation involved what might be called “colonial emancipation without national independence”; the resulting departmentalization of Martinique effectively ended colonial rule on the island, but failed to bring to the island’s citizens any true measure of equality in the eyes of the mainland French population. The push for departmentalization was an odd choice for Césaire given his celebration of Louverture in the *Notebook*, but some scholars have argued that Césaire’s program can be seen as an interesting utopian project that is, at the very least, in the *spirit* of Louverture. See Gary Wilder, “Untimely Vision: Aimé Césaire, Decolonization, Utopia,” *Public Culture* 21.1 (Winter 2009): 101-140.

²⁷⁹ Aimé Césaire & René Depestre, “An Interview,” in *Discourse on Colonialism*, 75.

What is also mine: a little cell in the Jura [...]
a lone man imprisoned in whiteness
a lone man defying the white screams of white death
(TOUSSAINT, TOUSSAINT L'OUVERTURE)²⁸⁰

From the ports of Bordeaux and Liverpool, where the African slave ships sailed, to the concrete jungles of metropolitan New York, from the cotton plantations of the American South to a prison cell in the mountains of France,²⁸¹ Césaire's narrator traverses three centuries, compressing the treason of whiteness into a single stanza, propelling the years of misery, pain, and hate into a productive principle, the path towards freedom. And, Césaire himself, not of the bourgeois class, but certainly well-educated, far-removed from the experience of the Negro slaves of the American plantations, experiences, in the space of a few lines of poetry, the reality of chattel slavery and accepts this history as his own, forging for the first time the bonds of common experience, the collective myth, that forms the basis for the political epistemology of *négritude*.

"I have always recognized that what was happening to my brothers in Algeria or the United States had its repercussions in me," Césaire told René Depestre in 1967.

I understood that I could not be indifferent to what was happening in Haiti or Africa.... [W]e slowly came to the idea of a sort of black civilization spread throughout the world. And I have come to the realization that there was a "Negro situation" that existed in different geographical areas, that Africa was also my country. There was the African continent, the Antilles, Haiti; there were Martinicans

²⁸⁰ Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, 15-16.

²⁸¹ "The Jura" here is a reference to the prison at Fort de Joux where Toussaint Louverture died after having been captured by Napoleonic forces and imprisoned in 1802.

and Brazilian Negroes, etc. That's what Négritude meant to me.²⁸²

Looking back over the *Notebook*, we must realize that négritude was not just about the present moment (the “return”), nor was it solely about the past (the “native land”). It was about bringing the two together, refusing to feel shame for one's past, and allowing that past to drive the present moment. Césaire may have been the first to coin the term, but négritude was a collective, collaborative project, and one that stretched far beyond the immediate boundaries of the Antilles or the mother country. Even in the United States, Langston Hughes would deliver a manifesto for the Harlem Renaissance that bears a striking resemblance to the project of négritude:

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know them, and we stand on top of the mountain free within ourselves.²⁸³

Though Césaire and his early co-conspirators in Paris had not come into any direct contact with the writers of the Harlem Renaissance, they were certainly aware of what was happening in New York, and found much to discuss in the work of Langston Hughes and especially Claude McKay. “I knew very well who McKay was,” Césaire would later state, “McKay's novel, *Banjo*—describing the life of dock workers in Marseilles—was published in 1930. This was really one of the first works in which an author spoke of the Negro and gave him a certain literary dignity.”²⁸⁴ The period between the 1920s and the 1930s, between the two world wars, was, as Léon Damas wrote, “one of great fertility. The first Pan-Negro Congress, due to the initiative of Du Bois, took place in Paris. The theories of Marcus

²⁸² Aimé Césaire and René Depestre, “An Interview,” 77.

²⁸³ Langston Hughes quoted by Léon Damas, “Négritude and Surrealism,” in *Black, Brown & Beige*, 131.

²⁸⁴ Aimé Césaire and René Depestre, “An Interview,” 71.

Garvey were in the air.”²⁸⁵ Thus, the historical project of *négritude*, of understanding, really *fully* understanding—and accepting—the true historical weight of the black experience, bringing together the putrid reality of chattel slavery and the raw beauty of the African tribal rhythms, the assimilation under colonial rule and the great migration, was an important part of a much larger project from which would develop a consciousness of black life that could no longer be dismissed, ignored, or forgotten.

At the time we began ... people could write a history of world civilization without devoting a single chapter to Africa, as if Africa had made no contributions to the world. Therefore, we affirmed that we were Negroes ... and that Africa was not some sort of blank page in the history of humanity; in sum, we asserted that our Negro heritage was worthy of respect, and that this heritage was not relegated to the past, that its values were values that could still make an important contribution to the world.... Universalizing, living values that had not been exhausted.²⁸⁶

The strong relationship to surrealism here should be obvious. Aside from any direct links between Breton and Césaire already outlined, the use of the individual experience as the basis for a collective epistemology is central to surrealism’s poetic politics. As Breton had written in “The Political Position of Surrealism,” “art is no longer a question of the creation of a personal myth, but rather, with Surrealism, *of the creation of a collective myth*.”²⁸⁷ The development of *négritude* was undoubtedly a part of this larger collaborative project of collective subjectivity.

“*Négritude*,” Césaire would later suggest, in a 1987 lecture, “in my eyes, is not a philosophy. *Négritude* is not a metaphysics. *Négritude* is not a pretentious conception of the

²⁸⁵ Léon Damas, “Surrealism and *Négritude*,” 131.

²⁸⁶ Aimé Césaire and René Depestre, “An Interview,” 76.

²⁸⁷ André Breton, “The Political Position of Surrealism,” in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 232.

universe. It is a way of living history within history: the history of a community whose experience appears to be... unique.”²⁸⁸

Breton, perhaps missing *some* of the specificity of Césaire’s négritude-as-collective-experience,²⁸⁹ was eager to extend the universality of this shared experience that Césaire discussed to the surrealist project as a whole:

What I find invaluable ... is that it [the *Notebook*] constantly transcends the anguish a black associates with the fate of black people in modern society, and that ... it encompasses the condition allotted to *man* by that society even to its unbearable, but also infinitely amendable, dimensions. And here comes to the fore in bold type what surrealism has always considered as the first article of its charter: ... the imperious need to do away with the deadly division in the human spirit in which one component has managed to give itself complete license at the expense of the other, whereas the very suppression of the latter will inevitably end up exalting it.²⁹⁰

Though in later years, and largely as a result of the writings of Senghor, négritude would take on a certain characteristic of racial essentialism,²⁹¹ it is important to note that Césaire’s early form of négritude as it is expressed in the *Notebook* balanced a racial consciousness with a desire to bring black consciousness into resonance with other racial—and historical,

²⁸⁸ Aimé Césaire, “Lecture on Négritude,” cited in Souleymane Diagne, “Négritude.”

²⁸⁹ An oversight for which we should not necessarily fault him, given the fact that Césaire had yet to make a full, clear, and comprehensive explanation of négritude by the time Breton agreed to write the introductory essay for the first bound edition of Césaire’s poem. That being said, one does need to be attentive to a certain tendency in Breton’s writings—not entirely foreign from those who followed him—to recuperate people and projects into the surrealist canon at will, and sometimes at odds with the original intention of the authors or actors! Whether Césaire saw his poem as truly representative of the *human* experience, or simply as the *black* experience, Breton’s move to relate the two together should be seen as an important precursor to the surrealist critique of whiteness, and celebration of the black experience that would play such a large role in the movement’s later years, especially in the United States.

²⁹⁰ André Breton, “A Great Black Poet,” xvii–xviii.

²⁹¹ Though René Ménil would later argue that it was, in fact, Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Orphée Noir*, that really established négritude as a movement only available to blacks. On this point, see Nigel Gibson’s discussion of this in “Fanon and the Pitfalls of Cultural Studies, in *Frantz Fanon: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Anthony Alessandrini (London: Routledge, 1999), 106–07, and Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijalkowski’s introduction to *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean* (London: Verso, 1996).

political, geographical—identities.

... the work

of man has only begun

and man still must overcome all the interdictions wedged in

the recesses of his fervor

and no race has a monopoly on beauty, on intelligence, on strength

and there is room for everyone at the convocation of conquest²⁹²

Emptied of anger, Césaire now seeks only to cultivate a “unique race,” measured by suffering, that brings together the shared struggles of the forgotten, suppressed masses of history, wherever they may have struggled, no matter the color of their skin.²⁹³

Indeed, Césaire and the other writers in the *Tropiques* group, at least, recognized a unity of spirit in the poetical-political work of the French surrealists, and were happy to see négritude as a kind of *black surrealism*, legitimating, in part at least, Breton’s claim. “If I have become the man that I am,” Damas said in 1973, “I owe it to surrealism.”²⁹⁴

Aimé Césaire and his wife Suzanne would refer to the impact that Breton, and surrealism itself, had on their writing and on their political thought throughout the rest of their lives. But, as Franklin Rosemont points out in his seminal collection, *Black, Brown & Beige: Surrealism in the African Diaspora* (co-edited with Robin DG Kelley), the influence was mutual: “It is obvious and beyond argument that Breton’s impact on the Césaires was significant and lasting, as they readily and repeatedly acknowledged, but it is also evident that the impact of the Césaires—Aimé’s and Suzanne’s—on Breton was (as *he* acknowledged) at

²⁹² Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, 44.

²⁹³ Of course, the reality that so many of these forgotten masses might be found in the communities of the African diaspora is not lost on Césaire, but he is quick to recognize that there is a universality of struggle that extends beyond the limits of the color of one’s skin.

²⁹⁴ Léon Damas quoted in *Black, Brown and Beige*, 128.

least as great, and in certain respects, even greater.”²⁹⁵ What is critical to understand about Aimé Césaire’s surrealism, and this is the essential connection with *négritude*, is that it was not simply a French import, as Franklin Rosemont continues. “Far from being an import, . . . the surrealism of *Tropiques* was plainly an indigenous cultural eruption.”²⁹⁶

²⁹⁵ Franklin Rosemont and Robin DG Kelley, *Black, Brown & Beige*, 64.

²⁹⁶ Franklin Rosemont and Robin DG Kelley, *Black, Brown & Beige*, 64.

Chapter Six: Vernacular Surrealism and Urban Anthropology

In the 1962 edition of *The Black Jacobins*, C.L.R. James, the great Trinidadian critical theorist and Pan-African revolutionary, includes an Appendix that examines the then-contemporary importance of Toussaint Louverture, in which he devotes several pages to Césaire's discovery of Haiti as the birthplace of *négritude* in the *Notebook*:

In 1939, a black West Indian from the French colony of Martinique published in Paris the finest and most famous poem ever written about Africa, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*.²⁹⁷

James' choice of words here is interesting: he describes the *Notebook* as a poem "about Africa." James, too, perceived the "return" in Césaire's poem as a journey to a historical home, an ancestral birthing ground, and not solely to his childhood home. That is, "[a]s a West Indian he has nothing national to be aware of.... [he] discovers a new version of what the Haitians, as had Garvey and Padmore, had discovered: that the salvation for the West Indies lies in Africa, the original home and ancestry of the West Indian people." Yet James, who remained critical of the black nationalist strains of thought within the radical tradition, recognizes that Césaire avoids the trap of essentialism that Senghor and others had fallen into. Citing the stanzas at the end of Césaire's poem, in which the narrator tells us that the true work of man—as a whole—is not yet finished, James writes:

Here is the centre of Césaire's poem. By neglecting it, Africans and the sympathetic other races utter loud hurrahs that drown out common sense and reason. The work of man is not finished. Therefore the future of the African is not to continue not discovering anything. The monopoly of beauty, of intelligence, of force, is possessed

²⁹⁷ C.L.R. James, "Appendix: From Toussaint L'Ouverture to Fidel Castro," in *The Black Jacobins* (New York: Vintage, 1963): 399.

by no race, certainly not by those who possess Négritude. Négritude is what one race brings to the common rendezvous where all will strive for the new world of the poet's vision.... [I]t would be the most vulgar racism not to see here a poetic incarnation of Marx's famous sentence, "The real history of humanity will begin."²⁹⁸

James saw Césaire's poem as an expression of négritude, an element within an "integrated humanity," based on union—an egalitarian union—"of the African sphere of existence with the Western world," a logical and historical link between mankind's past and its future.²⁹⁹

This project of linking Africa with the Western world, of bringing the diverse elements of mankind's past into a pattern from which would spring forth a new possible future for a truly integrated humanity, was one that James himself was deeply invested in. In 1937, just one year before the *Notebook* had first appeared in Paris, James had published *The Black Jacobins*, a history of the Haitian revolution focused on the central figure of Toussaint Louverture, who, of course, Césaire and the other surrealists had already recognized as central to their complementary historical projects. Penned "as part of an effort to close the cultural and political gap between Caribbean black history and European history," *The Black Jacobins* examined the history of the French Revolution from the perspective of the Haitian slaves, placing the French revolutionary ideals of liberty, fraternity, and equality squarely at the heart of both revolutionary struggles.³⁰⁰ Though Toussaint occupies a central role in his story ("one of the most remarkable men of a period rich in remarkable men"³⁰¹), James argues that it is the vast mass of Haitian slaves who fought alongside Toussaint, who *created* Toussaint, *elevated* him to the position of leader, on whose behalf he lived and, ultimately,

²⁹⁸ C.L.R. James, "From Toussaint ...," 401.

²⁹⁹ C.L.R. James, "From Toussaint ...," 402.

³⁰⁰ Donald E. Pease, "C.L.R. James's *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways* and the World We Live In," in C.L.R. James, *Mariners Renegades, and Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In* (Hanover: UP of New England, 2001), viii.

³⁰¹ C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins*, x.

died, who are of the greatest interest (“Toussaint did not make the revolution. It was the revolution that made Toussaint”³⁰²).³⁰³ The Haitian slaves, far from being divorced from the struggles taking place in mainland France, were, according to James, deeply influenced by the ideals of the revolution, seeing their own reality mirrored in the struggles on the mainland:

They had heard of the revolution and had construed it in their own image: the white slaves in France had risen, and killed their masters, and were now enjoying the fruits of the earth. It was gravely inaccurate in fact, but they had caught the spirit of the thing. Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.³⁰⁴

The French, of course, didn’t see the insurrection in San Domingo and the uprisings in Guadeloupe and Martinique (the latter were ultimately unsuccessful) in quite the same way. When Toussaint appeared on the scene, proclaiming “[an] oath that I have made, to cease to live before gratitude dies in my heart, before I cease to be faithful to France and to my duty, before the god of liberty is profaned and sullied by the liberticides,” the French republicans were frankly baffled and, perhaps rightfully, terrified.³⁰⁵

In essence, James argued, the subjugated, downtrodden Haitian slaves had understood the principles of the revolution—liberty, equality—better than the French, themselves: “the slogans of the revolution ... meant more to them than to any Frenchman,” because the slaves, according to James, at least, had so much more to gain than the French republicans ever did.³⁰⁶ Indeed, the Haitians had become more French (at least, in an ideal sense) than the French themselves. As the great post-colonial theorist Edward Said would

³⁰² C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins*, x.

³⁰³ In the preface to a later edition of the book, James would write, “I was tired of reading and hearing about Africans being persecuted and oppressed in Africa, in the Middle Passage, in the USA and all over the Caribbean. I made up my mind that I would write a book in which Africans or people of African descent instead of constantly being the object of other people’s exploitation and ferocity would themselves be taking action on a grand scale and shaping other people to their own needs” (quoted in Nicole King, *C.L.R. James and Creolization: Circles of Influence* [Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2007], 31).

³⁰⁴ C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins*, 81.

³⁰⁵ C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins*, 197.

³⁰⁶ C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins*, 198.

later say of *The Black Jacobins*, the history that James narrates is, like Césaire’s, “broken up ... dispersed in geography, in archival sources, in emphases both Black and French.... [E]vents in France and Haiti criss-cross and refer to one another like voices in a fugue.”³⁰⁷ In blending the history of the French revolution, told by metropolitan scholars, with the history of the Haitian revolution, told here by a historian who is himself from the periphery, James carries out some of the work he sees as implied by Césaire’s *négritude*: bringing Europe and Africa closer together, at that “common rendezvous” of humanity. And, for James, Toussaint is one of the privileged subjects of history who, when he becomes a narrative subject, provides the storyteller (or, in this case, the historian) with an unlikely axis around which to spin a web of relations between seemingly opposing forces.

“Moreover,” Said continues,

James writes of Toussaint as someone who takes up the struggle for human freedom—a struggle also going on in the metropolis to which he culturally owes his language and many of his moral allegiances.... He appropriates the principles of the Revolution not as a Black man, but as a human, and he does so with a dense historical awareness of how in finding the language of Diderot, Rousseau, and Robespierre one follows predecessors creatively, using the same words, employing inflections that transformed rhetoric into reality.³⁰⁸

Especially in light of Said’s discussion, it’s not difficult to see why James finds Césaire’s work to be of particular interest. Césaire’s own narrative—his personal narrative, which makes up a part of the *Notebook*—parallels in part the narrative that James weaves around Toussaint’s history: the West Indian who owes to France his language, his liberty, his literature, who is, in coming into his own as a revolutionary subject, able to embody the potentiality of a

³⁰⁷ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 279.

³⁰⁸ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 279-80.

liberated France, a liberated humanity, in accepting his own enslavement and in doing so, not capitulating to it, but moving beyond it.

James had found himself in what he perceived to be a similar situation some ten years prior to writing the Appendix to *The Black Jacobins*. After the book's initial publication in London, where it was widely acclaimed as a history of the Haitian revolution, James had, in 1938, travelled to the United States on a lecture tour, and opted to remain there instead of returning to the UK at the end of his tour. A member of the Socialist Workers Party when he first travelled to the United States, James left the SWP in 1940 in protest over the Soviet invasion of Finland, and helped to found the post-Trotskyist Workers Party along with Max Shachtman. With Raya Dunayevskaya and, later, Grace Lee Boggs, James formed the Johnson-Forest Tendency, a minority formation within the larger WP. Though the members of the Johnson-Forest Tendency would eventually split, developing in three different—though related—directions over the course of the following two decades, as a member of this unusually politically-astute and theoretically-gifted triumvirate, James would attain wide renown not just as a Marxist scholar, but also as a cultural critic. As Sylvia Wynter wrote,

James was a Negro yet British, a colonial native yet a part of the public school code, attached to the cause of the proletariat yet a member of the middle class, a Marxian yet a Puritan, an intellectual who plays cricket, of African descent yet Western, a Trotskyist and Pan-Africanist, a Marxist yet a supporter of black studies, a West Indian majority black yet an American minority black.³⁰⁹

He was also, according to the United States government, a dangerous subversive. James, like so many other Marxist intellectuals, was swept up in the Red Scare that shuddered across the

³⁰⁹ Sylvia Wynter, "Beyond the Categories of the Master Conception: The Counterdoctrine of Jamsean Poesis," in *C.L.R. James's Caribbean*, ed. Paul Buhle and Paget Henry (Chapel Hill: Duke UP, 1996), 69. Quoted by Donald J. Pease in the "Introduction" to *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways*, x.

country in the wake of the Second World War, and the lead-up to the Cold War. Arrested in the summer of 1952 for “passport violations,” James was interned on Ellis Island for six months before being denied the right to US citizenship and ultimately deported. *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In* was written during his time in the detention camp on Ellis Island, at the end of what Stuart Hall has called “the third phase of James’ life,” which occupied the last several years of James’ American sojourn, before his departure for the Caribbean—that *other* America—where he would spend a large portion of the fourth and final phase of his life.³¹⁰

Like *The Black Jacobins*, James’s book on Herman Melville was, essentially, a new look at a classic drama—in this case *Moby Dick* and the *Pequod*, but also the birth of American capitalism, for which James sees *Moby Dick* as a metaphor—refocused around the perspective of those most often left out of the story: the crew of Captain Ahab’s ship. In James’ reading, as Emily Eakin wrote in the *New York Times*, upon the republication of the book sixteen years after James’ death, “Melville’s 1851 novel becomes a pointed allegory of cold war-era America in which the ship, the *Pequod*, is a stand-in for the mechanized world of the factory; the monomaniacal Captain Ahab, a ruthless corporate manager; the narrator, Ishmael, an impotent intellectual unable to thwart Ahab’s totalitarian tendencies; and the ship’s polyglot crew, an uncannily exact analogy for the nation’s melting pot of workers.”³¹¹

It was also an allegory for James’ own imprisonment, as his final chapter, “A Natural But Necessary Conclusion,” makes abundantly clear, a “wonderfully Jamesean gesture,” as Stuart Hall writes:

As a part of his defense ... he attempted to present *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways*

³¹⁰ Stuart Hall, “C.L.R. James: A Portrait,” in *C.L.R. James’s Caribbean*, 12.

³¹¹ Emily Eakin, “Embracing the Wisdom of a Castaway,” *The New York Times* (August 4, 2001). Available online at <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/08/04/books/embracing-the-wisdom-of-a-castaway.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm> (Accessed January 5, 2013).

as testimony to the fact that he was a much better American than the immigration authorities. It was as though he was saying, “You do not understand your greatest artist, Melville, and I do. How can you export me for un-American activities when I am telling you that next to Shakespeare, here is the greatest use of the English language? It is because you do not understand what your own author is telling you that you can expel me. You should welcome me—not throw me out.”³¹²

Indeed, upon the book’s completion, James mailed a copy to every member of Congress with a request that they contribute one dollar towards his legal defense fund. Needless to say, the plan was a flop.³¹³ James was deported in 1953.³¹⁴

Though he never said as much, it’s not difficult to imagine that James saw himself in a position very similar to Césaire’s and, by association, Toussaint’s: a foreigner whose understanding of that land on whose soil he trespassed was perhaps greater than that of the people who were born there. Just as Toussaint had understood better than the French the ideals of liberty and equality,³¹⁵ and Césaire had mastered and then freed the French language from its colonization, James, born in the English-speaking Caribbean, educated in Britain, and writing on the heels of fifteen years spent as an observer of both American democracy and American popular culture, saw in Melville’s greatest work a wealth of historical truths that American scholars, treating the book largely as literature, had missed. “By reinterpreting this Americanist masterwork from the standpoint of the crew,” suggests Donald E. Pease in his introduction to the book’s re-release in 2001, “James had extended into the largest

³¹² Stuart Hall, “C.L.R. James: A Portrait,” 12.

³¹³ Cf. Emily Eakin, “Embracing the Wisdom of a Castaway,” on this point.

³¹⁴ He was later allowed a return visit to the country, in the late 1960s, first for a lecture tour and later as professor at the University of the District of Columbia.

³¹⁵ James argues, as do other scholars, that the Haitian revolution was hastened by the introduction of the “Declaration of the Rights of Man,” drafted in the wake of the French Revolution. As Philip Kaisary writes, the slave rebellion is, for James “a radical transmutation of of the French ‘Rights of Man.’” Philip Kaisary, “Human Rights and Radical Universalism,” *Law and Humanities* 6.2 (2012), 209.

metropolitan nation of the mid-twentieth century a practice of social resistance.”³¹⁶

James saw *Moby Dick* as indicative of a larger social turn—a turn that would locate ordinary men and women at the center of world society. Captain Ahab is, in James’s reading, a revolutionary—and simultaneously counter-revolutionary—figure. “Ahab ... utters words which strike at the very foundation of American civilization,” James writes at the beginning of *Mariners, Renegades & Castaways*. “He says, in effect, to hell with business and money.”³¹⁷ Indeed, Ahab presents an interesting challenge to capitalism—he is an individual adrift in a world rapidly decreasing in size as capitalism drives economic interests more towards conglomeration—what we now call “globalization,” and James called “world civilization.” Ahab retains his humanity in the face of an increasingly dehumanized world, yet he ultimately fails in his revolutionary pursuit: in defending his own liberty and individuality, he fails to see that he is limiting—at best—the very same of his crew. For Ahab to become a truly revolutionary subject, he would have had to recognize this fundamental contradiction and move towards collective, rather than individual, action. Thus, against the destructive power of Ahab, James positions the crew—as stand in for “ordinary people,” the mass workers in America and other industrialized nations—as the true revolutionary subjects.

What is even more striking about *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways* is the role James assigns to himself as narrator—putting himself into the narrative position of Ishmael, who is largely portrayed as a disinterested intellectual, but shifting the focus of narration from Ahab to Queequeg, Tashtego, and Daggoo, the crew members largely ignored by Melville’s narrator. “To a peculiar degree,” David Roediger writes, “and in a way deserving study by

³¹⁶ Donald E. Pease, “C.L.R. James’s *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways* ...,” xv. In his introduction to the 2001 edition of the book, Pease notes the significance of the re-publication of this all-but-forgotten work. Of the 20,000 copies originally printed of the book in 1953 by James’ Johnsonite followers in the United States after his departure, “all but two thousand were reclaimed by the publisher for nonpayment” (xiii). Two subsequent editions followed, but both expurgated the final chapter in which James makes his plea for citizenship, and explicitly sets up the book as proof positive of his deep and abiding understanding of the American way of life.

³¹⁷ CLR James, *Mariners, Renegades & Castaways*, 5.

radical writers, James combines the functions of critic and storyteller, of popularizer and analyst.”³¹⁸ Written in a “vernacular style,” the book “selected certain elements from *Moby Dick* whose significance for American culture had already been articulated by the Americanist literary establishment. When James the recoded them as forms of emancipatory struggle, he contradicted the received interpretation of the novel.”³¹⁹

In essence, what James gives us is a reading of Melville’s story that goes against the grain, and Roediger’s summation of James’ work in *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways* as a kind of “vernacular” history or analysis is of interest in the context of the present study—the term was of great importance for the surrealists. James was deeply invested in the study of popular culture—cricket, famously, but also the films of Chaplin, Eisenstein, and Griffith, who turned the focus of “art” on mass society—as were the surrealists. Years later, Franklin Rosemont would celebrate James for his “merciless critique of the reactionary rationalism that then passed for Marxism,” as well as his “passionate celebration of workingclass creativity and revolutionary internationalism at their inspired best.”³²⁰ In fact, echoing both James and E.P. Thompson, the later surrealists—especially those in the United States, and the Rosemonts in particular—would define their project as one of “vernacular surrealism,” a kind of surrealist dialect, a way of experiencing, understanding, and describing the world peculiar to their American context.³²¹ If surrealism itself was to be seen as a kind of *lingua franca* that was able to transcend the boundaries of language, geography, and sanity, then the vernacular surrealisms were those homegrown, indigenous microcosms of surrealist activity that popped up around the globe in the wake of World War Two.

³¹⁸ David Roediger, “Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways,” *Urgent Tasks* 12 (Summer 1981), reprinted as “C.L.R. James and Herman Melville,” in *Surrealist Subversions*, 675.

³¹⁹ Donald E. Pease, “C.L.R. James’s *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways* ...,” xv.

³²⁰ See the Charles H. Kerr Company edition of CLR James, *Facing Reality* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Company, 2003).

³²¹ The phrase shows up frequently in the Chicago group’s writings, but see, for example, the Introduction to *The Forecast Is Hot*.

Members of the surrealist movement have long claimed James as a fellow traveller, and his work is included in many of the anthologies of surrealist writing produced in the later half of the twentieth century.³²² And, James did come into contact with members of the International Surrealist Movement throughout his life, although he never engaged with surrealism in any sustained fashion, at least not in writing, aside from the few pages he devotes to his analysis of Aimé Césaire's *Notebook* in the Appendix to *The Black Jacobins*. Despite that, the surrealists were deeply influenced by James' work both in the United States and abroad: Pierre Naville, a French sociologist and an early member of the Paris group, translated James' *Black Jacobins* into French in 1949, and the 1937 edition of Mary Low and Juan Breá's *Red Spanish Notebook* contains an introduction penned by James—though James casts the two young adventurers more as proletarian revolutionaries than surrealist revolutionaries (though some might say that they are the same thing!).³²³

The American surrealists of the late 1960s were the most directly influenced by James, despite the fact that he had already left the country by the time the first glimmers of an indigenous American surrealist movement had begun to show themselves. James' work circulated heavily in the radical political circles of the New Left, throughout the '60s and '70s. Paul Buhle, not a surrealist per se, but certainly a fellow traveller and a close comrade of the Rosemonts, who was active in SDS as an undergraduate at the University of Illinois, and maintained close ties with the Chicago group even after he left to pursue his graduate degree in Madison, WI, founded the SDS-affiliated journal *Radical America* in 1967, and published essays by James alongside essays by some of the Chicago surrealists and others in the

³²² Franklin Rosemont and Robin DG Kelley include James in their stunning anthology of surrealist writings from the African diaspora, *Black, Brown & Beige*, pp. 59-60.

³²³ Mary Low tells the story of meeting James for the first time at the offices of Martin, Secker & Warburg, where he held a position as reader in the 30s. Low and Breá had heard of James through their Trotskyite comrades in Paris, and decided to submit the manuscript of the *Red Spanish Notebook* to the publisher as a result. James accepted the manuscript immediately, and the two surrealists travelled to London to sign the contracts and to meet James. See Mary Low, "Remembering C.L.R. James," in *Surrealist Subversions*, 672-673.

Solidarity Bookshop crowd.³²⁴ In that sense, Buhle played an important role in keeping both James' work, and the work of the surrealists, intimately connected to the student surge and the New Left. The relationship would deepen as the years drew on, and the Charles H. Kerr Company would, under the Rosemonts' watch, publish numerous volumes of James' work, as well as the work of James' close contemporaries like Martin Glaberman and George Rawick.

In the very first issue of *Arsenal*, the occasional and incendiary publication of the Chicago surrealists, the group had quoted James on black liberation: "among the Black people of America 'there sleep and are now awakening passions of a violence exceeding, perhaps ... anything among the tremendous forces that capitalism has created.... The hatred of bourgeois society and the readiness to destroy it when the opportunity should present itself, rests among them to a greater degree than in any other section of the population.'"³²⁵ Surrealism had a historical relationship to the struggle for black liberation, but in the charged atmosphere of the 1960s and 1970s in America, this relationship had grown immeasurably. Early members of the group and close allies—including Robin DG Kelley, John Bracey, David Roediger, and others—had gone on to write important critiques of "whiteness" and histories or anthropological studies of the black experience, which both influenced and inspired the anti-racist character of the Chicago surrealist group's activities.

This interest in black culture ran deeper than a mere idle curiosity, or (even worse) a fetishization of the culture of the "other"; the surrealists had been engaged with the struggle for black liberation as allies and participants from the very beginning. John H. Bracey, Jr. recalls the Roosevelt University Anti-Poetry Club as an explicitly antiracist organization,

³²⁴ Buhle is also the author of one of the best biographies on CLR James, and one of the only biographies sanctioned by the James family, *CLR James: The Artist as Revolutionary* (London: Verso, 1988). The Chicago surrealists guest-edited an issue of *Radical America*, entitled "Surrealism in the Service of the Revolution," in 1970.

³²⁵ Editors of *Arsenal*, "Malcolm X," in *Surrealist Subversions*, 177.

which served as a springboard not just for cultural and political interventions on the Roosevelt campus, but for larger struggles happening around the city of Chicago as well. “Even more significant was the support of members of the Surrealist community for the more militant wing of the civil rights movement in Chicago,” Bracey writes, recalling a particular demonstration in 1962, when he and Bob Green (an early surrealist and Anti-Poetry Club member) found themselves “at the head of a crowd of hundreds of angry citizens who joined in expressing our disapproval of statements made earlier by the Mayor to the effect that ‘there were no ghettos in Chicago’ and that the NAACP was welcome to visit the city, but was not needed.... Comrades from Roosevelt put their bodies on the line when direct action was called for.”³²⁶ Thus, he concluded,

It was actions such as those coupled with their genuine love of and respect for the history and culture of African Americans, and their understanding of the necessity of African Americans setting the terms of their struggle, that placed Franklin and Penelope Rosemont, Bob Green and the others whose names are lost to me in time, firmly in the camp of what you now call the New Abolitionists.³²⁷

This Chicago group’s involvement with critique of whiteness didn’t stop at politics; the Chicago surrealists were also interested in and influenced by black culture, especially the blues, which they discussed in terms not dissimilar to Breton’s appreciation of Césaire’s work. Of particular importance here are Paul Garon’s writings on the “poetic spirit” of the blues, as he called it. “The best examples of the blues,” he wrote in 1970,

are fundamentally *poetic* in a sense which far exceeds the limits of the categories of thought of those who confuse poetic authenticity with the mere craft of literature. Refusing to be harnessed to the cause of the existing order—the church, the

³²⁶ John H. Bracey, Jr., “Letter: Anti-Poetry Club.”

³²⁷ John H. Bracey, Jr., “Letter: Anti-Poetry Club.”

prevailing hypocrisy in morals, the police, patriotism, the needs of commerce or the machinery of the state—the blues defiantly asserts the primacy of the passions and thus must be considered in the service of human freedom. As the specific form of poetry of a people for many years purposefully derived of more elaborate instruments of culture, blues comprise an elementary but magnificent revolt against the degradation of language and of life itself.³²⁸

Like Césaire, the American blues musicians fashioned a kind of revolutionary poetry by embracing the very misery and degradation of a colonized life. The blues, according to Garon, could never have come into existence “had the Black population in the U.S. not been subject to the torture and degradation of slavery, racism and discrimination, resulting in an oppression operative in all spheres of life: economic, sexual, political, cultural, and social.”³²⁹ For Garon and the other surrealists, what blues artists like Yank Rachell, Peetie Wheatstraw, and Georgia Tom had managed to do with their songs was to create a new kind of countercultural art—an explicitly black workingclass cultural form—that was both revolutionary and resistant to the “repressive norms of this society, essentially white bourgeois norms.”³³⁰ While others insisted that the blues be relegated to “a lower echelon of art forms,” the surrealists found the blues to be “one of America’s most stirring manifestations of the Marvelous,” existing simultaneously in the very real world of the lived experience of the black working class and in the dreamworld of the mind that “was in touch with the true reality beyond the appearances of everyday life.”³³¹

It was Garon’s interest in blues, as well as Franklin Rosemont’s interest in jazz, that drew the surrealists continually back to the urban theater of Maxwell Street, a site to which

³²⁸ Paul Garon, “Blues and the Poetry of Revolt,” in *Arsenal 1* (Chicago: Black Swan Press, 1970); reprinted in *Surrealist Subversions*, 613.

³²⁹ Paul Garon, “Blues and the Poetry of Revolt,” 613.

³³⁰ Paul Garon, “Blues and the Poetry of Revolt,” 618.

³³¹ Paul Garon, “Blues and the Poetry of Revolt,” 613, 620.

Franklin and Penelope Rosemont would return time and again in their surrealist anthropologies of life in Chicago. The market at Maxwell Street, which stretched from Halsted to 16th Street, was one of the largest open-air markets in the United States, “a jubilant mix of young, old, Black, white, brown, tan, in Sunday clothes, in rags, in cowboy hats, sombreros, felt hats with huge flowers, and some in outfits too bizarre to describe.”³³² Bordered on both sides with small shops and independently-owned department stores, the market and its surrounding neighborhood went through myriad changes over the years, slowly transforming itself from a center of urban Jewish life at the turn of the century to a center of African American life in the 1940s. In its heyday, especially in the decades after World War II, as Chicago became a major part of the urbanization of black life as a result of the First and Second Great Migrations, the Maxwell Street Market was a multicultural haven for artists, musicians, and everyday folks looking to make their way in the “great iron city, that impersonal mechanical city, amid the steam, the smoke, the snowy winds the blistering suns,” as Richard Wright would later describe Chicago. “There in that self-conscious city,” he would go on, describing the everyday realities of life for the city’s black population, “we caught whispers of the meanings that life could have, and we were pushed and pounded by facts much too big for us.”³³³ One of those facts was the reality of gentrification. The expanding sprawl of the University of Illinois campus began encroaching on Maxwell Street in the late 1960s, and in 1994, the market was relocated by the city to nearby Canal Street, and then moved again in 2008 to the intersection of Roosevelt and South Des Plaines Avenue. While the Market still operates today, it is a shadow of its former self, largely unrecognizable.

³³² Penelope Rosemont, “Maxwell Street in the Sixties,” in *Surrealist Experiences*, 42.

³³³ Richard Wright, “Introduction,” in St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (Chicago, U Chicago P, 1993): xvii.

In the mid-1960s, though, Maxwell Street had a role to play in the development of “Chicago-idea” surrealism. A Sunday morning trip to Maxwell Street, to pick up bargains, shop for vegetables, and, of course, listen to the blues, was *de rigueur* for the Solidarity Bookshop crowd. Some, like Penelope, had been visiting Maxwell Street for years—Penelope’s grandmother had grown up nearby, and had (so she said) sold matches on the street there at the age of five.³³⁴ Others visited for the first time with Penelope and Franklin and kept on going. Over the years, the Maxwell Street Market became a part of the life of the surrealist milieu in Chicago, and the surrealists became a part of the life of the market, too. Indeed, for the surrealists—and for many, many other Chicagoans—“Maxwell Street is not merely another historic landmark or crumbling monument, but an irreplaceable part of our lives, an irreplaceable part of the lives of all who live in Chicago and all who come here, an irreplaceable part of the life of the city itself.”³³⁵

Maxwell Street represented “creative disorder at its brightest and most spontaneous,” a “multi-dimensional free-for-all fair, where the worries and woes of the workaday world give way to the exuberant enjoyment of an unparalleled promenade through a waking dreamtime of color, scent and sound.”³³⁶ What is it about the shopping districts of the major metropolis that attracts surrealist wanderers? The Chicago surrealists described Maxwell Street in terms very close to the ones used by Aragon and Benjamin to narrate the wanderings of the *flâneur* through the Paris arcades. The captivation with these places of commerce and barter is as much an attraction to the crowds as it is an attraction to the objects on display themselves, according to the Chicago group. Though significantly brighter and busier than the Passage de l’Opéra (where Aragon set the scenes of his *Paris Peasant*),

³³⁴ Penelope Rosemont, “Maxwell Street in the Sixties,” in *Surrealist Experiences*, 42.

³³⁵ The Chicago Surrealist Group, “Maxwell Street Forever!,” in *Surrealist Subversions*, 452.

³³⁶ The Chicago Surrealist Group, “Maxwell Street Forever!,” in *Surrealist Subversions*, 451.

Maxwell Street was a far cry from the more polished and refined shopping districts of Chicago, a place where the titans of industry gave way to the beauty of barter, creating space for “a seemingly limitless supply of the world’s most wonderful junk—all in splendid juxtaposition that is itself the very stuff that poetry is made of.”³³⁷ Anything and everything could be found at Maxwell Street, and cobbled all together, heaped into improbable and unidentifiable piles of odds and ends, intermingled with objects both like and unlike themselves, these objects, according to Penelope, “took on a rare, disturbing beauty—a spontaneous exhibition of Surrealist Objects right there on the street.”³³⁸

The same might be said of the people the surrealists encountered working in the stalls, playing music on the street corners, or ambling along the thoroughfare—a strange, varied, and ever-changing cast of characters appearing from all walks of life. The market afforded the surrealists the opportunity to observe the more colorful elements of everyday working-class life in Chicago, while blending in with the crowd—a bit of the Marvelous found in the midst of the most mundane, everyday activity: shopping. As Ron Sakolsky writes in his history of the Chicago surrealist group, “You could almost smell the liberation from bureaucratic constraint in the air, as if the old East European/Jewish marketplace and the newer African and Latin American marketplace had merged into a convivial temporary autonomous zone within the city. Here was a piece of Chicago that had unfolded outside the reach of government planners in an open-ended way well suited to the anarchic inclinations of the Surrealist Group.”³³⁹ The surrealists—in the streets of Paris, as in Chicago—were participant-observers; never content to simply witness the urban scene from the outside, the surrealists threw themselves into the experience of everyday life with wild joy and great

³³⁷ The Chicago Surrealist Group, “Maxwell Street Forever!,” in *Surrealist Subversions*, 451.

³³⁸ Penelope Rosemont, “Maxwell Street in the Sixties,” in *Surrealist Experiences*, 43.

³³⁹ Ron Sakolsky, “Surrealist Subversion in Chicago,” in *Surrealist Subversions*, 92.

abandon. What they observed, they experienced; where they drew conclusions, made connections, they did so on the basis of their own lived experience of the world, or the shared experience they gained through conversations with those who had been around longer, who had seen more years pass. And, accordingly, the surrealists' historical view of the world was never one cobbled together from the pages of history books; history *emerged* through the surrealists' encounters with people and with objects in the world, encounters that seemed to happen more frequently and spontaneously in the ebb and flow of those crowded places like Maxwell Street, which served as observation chamber, archaeological dig, and commons all at the same time.³⁴⁰

From Breton's *Nadja* and Aragon's *Paris Peasant* to the Chicago surrealists' studies of the Windy City, urban life figures prominently in the surrealist landscape. Structurally speaking, the surrealists' Chicago bore a great number of similarities to the surrealists' Paris. Both cities bore the marks of rapid industrialization—socio-economically and politically, certainly, but also architecturally: both cities offer a visually identifiable style of architecture associated with the early modern period of metal construction.³⁴¹ Let us not forget Richard Wright's description of Chicago as the great "iron city"! But more than that, it was their similar *approach* to the exploration of the city that drew together the Chicago group with their Parisian counterparts. Leaving their direction, and possible discoveries up to chance, the Chicago surrealists experienced the city as few others had, coming into contact with

³⁴⁰ The idea of Maxwell Street as a "commons" is an interesting one that is, sadly, outside the scope of the present work. In recent years, activist-historians like Peter Linebaugh and George Caffentzis of the Midnight Notes Collective have made great strides in recuperating the notion of the commons in terms not dissimilar to ones used by the surrealists to describe their interest in places like Maxwell Street and the Arcades. See, for example, *Promissory Notes: From Crises to Commons*, released March 2009 by Midnight Notes; and Peter Linebaugh, "All for One and One for All: Some Principles of the Commons," in *Counterpunch* (January 8-10, 2010): available online at <http://www.counterpunch.org/2010/01/08/some-principles-of-the-commons/> (accessed January 14, 2013).

³⁴¹ Walter Benjamin would argue that the development of the first cast-iron construction was a defining element of the modern period. In Chicago, the growth of the Chicago school of architecture, which made great use of both cast-iron and steel construction, largely defined the city's architectural form, especially as the city was rebuilt in the wake of the Great Chicago Fire.

countless “magnificent eccentrics” whose everyday realities blended together with those of the surrealists. The Chicago group argued that these strange personalities—which included the great outsider artist Lee Godie, the blues guitarist Arvella Gray, and many, many others—scared most people out of their wits, resulting in an almost pathological need to ignore the very existence of these odd nonconformists. That fear, according to the surrealists, who were steeped in the theories of Freud, largely courtesy of Paul Garon and Herbert Marcuse, was *really* a fear of the unknown, a fear that they, happily, did not share, and in fact embraced as a methodological principle. Indeed, they “recognized these ‘characters’ as friends, comrades, allies, and above all as fellow seekers on the path of poetry and the Marvelous.”³⁴²

The practice of finding the moments of the Marvelous in one’s everyday encounters was not new to surrealism; Breton had already begun to flesh out the concept in *Nadja* and *Mad Love*, and others had further developed it by incorporating everyday objects into their creative practice. Yet the Chicago group recognized this as a defining principle, and used it, to great end, as a key feature in their later historical investigations. Far from being a fixed idea, surrealism looked different, and encompassed different forms and fellow travelers, in every context in which it appeared. If the Chicago group interacted with the great blues players of the Sixties in their walks through the Maxwell Street Market, then the blues became a part of surrealism’s specific Chicago vernacular. So too was the case for the other characters and communities who made up Chicago’s past and present day.

Franklin, Penelope, and many of the other early members of the Chicago Surrealist Group, had been trained early on to notice these sorts of “vernacular” elements of urban life. As students at Roosevelt University, they had met St. Clair Drake, and Drake’s work is

³⁴² Ron Sakolsky, “Surrealist Subversion in Chicago,” in *Surrealist Subversions*, 63.

as much a part of the unique collection of influences and inspirations that make up the “Chicago idea” of surrealism, as is that of André Breton. Indeed, as Franklin Rosemont and Robin DG Kelley would write in the introduction to their *Black, Brown & Beige* collection, “Drake’s reflections on the possibilities of an urban anthropology ... led directly to the Chicago surrealists’ conception of a vernacular surrealism, as manifested in popular culture.”³⁴³ Drake, of course, wasn’t a surrealist. But his political work brought him into contact with both Aimé Césaire and C.L.R. James at different points, and Frantz Fanon, who had studied under Aimé Césaire as a lycee student in Martinique in the 1940s, recognized Drake’s project as an immediate successor to Césaire’s pioneering work on *négritude*: “the poets of *négritude*,” he wrote in *The Wretched of the Earth*, “will not stop at the limits of the continent. From America, black voices will take up the hymn with fuller unison. The ‘black world’ will see the light and Busia from Ghana, Birago Diop from Senegal, Hampate Ba from the Sudan, and St. Clair Drake from Chicago will not hesitate to assert the existence of common ties and a motive power that is identical.”³⁴⁴

Born in Suffolk, Virginia in 1911, Drake was, by his own admission, an “activist-anthropologist,”³⁴⁵ a student of the great W. Allison Davis, himself an anthropologist and the first African American to hold a full professor position at a majority white university in the United States.³⁴⁶ Drake had been inspired by Davis’s work while studying at Hampton Institute in the last years of the 1920s, and, on Davis’s suggestion, applied for a fellowship

³⁴³ Franklin Rosemont and Robin DG Kelley, *Black, Brown & Beige*, 247.

³⁴⁴ Frantz Fanon quoted in Franklin Rosemont and Robin DG Kelley, *Black, Brown & Beige*, 256. The quote is from an early and largely inaccurate translation of *The Wretched of the Earth*, and taken somewhat out of context. While Fanon *does* associate Drake with the growth and development of *négritude* (a relation that Drake himself acknowledges in several important essays), Fanon’s ultimate point in this section, a part of his “On National Culture” chapter, is a negative one: he sees the conceptual development of the “black world”—the great outcome of *négritude*—as “irresponsible.” See Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 151; see also the French original, *Les damnés de la terre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), 258.

³⁴⁵ George Clement Bond and St. Clair Drake, “A Social Portrait of John Gibbs St. Clair Drake: An American Anthropologist,” *American Ethnologist* 15.4 (November 1988), 775.

³⁴⁶ Cf. George Clement Bond and St. Clair Drake, “A Social Portrait St. Clair Drake,” 780.

for further studies in anthropology at the University of Chicago in 1937.³⁴⁷ In the intervening years, Drake remained in rural Virginia, working to support himself as a high school teacher. In 1935, Davis invited Drake to join the research team for a project that would eventually be published as *Deep South*, a survey of what researchers at the time called the “color-caste” system, an anthropological investigation of social stratification within racial groupings in a small Mississippi town. It was in the process of carrying out research for the *Deep South* project that Drake would first begin to identify himself as a “participant-observer,” seeing a need to identify his own closeness and shared experience with those subjects he studied. “It was truly a ‘cross-cultural’ experience,” he wrote in 1978, “and living with this stratum was very satisfying to me because it coincided with my own political values—’identification with the masses.’”³⁴⁸ Drake’s anthropology, even in his later years, was never separate from his subjects—his most successful works are the ones in which he applies his methodology to the study of African American life, to the study of subjects with whom he feels kinship, and shares experience. In the face of traditional ethnography, which clung to the necessity of “outsider” researchers, Drake’s anthropology was a kind of interior anthropology, a study from within, instead of from outside, the community in question.³⁴⁹

Drake’s most famous work—and the one which made the greatest impact on the surrealists—is undoubtedly *Black Metropolis*, a landmark study of black urbanization, which rests on a foundation of extensive interviews with the African American residents of Chicago’s South Side and other documents collected under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration. The project originally began as a study of the problem of juvenile delinquency on the South Side, a collaboration between Drake and sociologist Horace R.

³⁴⁷ George Clement Bond and St. Clair Drake, “A Social Portrait St. Clair Drake,” 769.

³⁴⁸ St. Clair Drake, “Reflections on Anthropology and the Black Experience,” *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 9.2 (Summer 1978), 94.

³⁴⁹ Drake mentions this briefly in his short history of the development of black anthropology in St. Clair Drake, “Reflections on Anthropology and the Black Experience,” 100.

Cayton, Jr., both of whom were graduate students at the University of Chicago at the time.³⁵⁰

As it became clear to the two young scholars that they would really need to address root causes if they were to study juvenile delinquency in any conclusive fashion, the project slowly morphed into a much larger one, and the entire community's culture became the object of investigation, as did "the structure and organization of the Negro community, both internally, and in relation to the metropolis of which it is a part."³⁵¹

Black Metropolis was notable for its blending of anthropological and sociological approaches, as Richard Wright points out in his introduction to the book. "The book examines the social structure [on the South Side] as though it were frozen in a moment in time, which is the approach of anthropology; and it examines the processes and dynamics which take place in that structure, which is the approach of sociology."³⁵² The book is a fascinating narrative woven together from authorial observations, statistical studies, and first-person narratives in the form of extensive quotations from the residents of "Bronzeville" (as the South Side neighborhood on which Drake and Cayton focused was often called). The quotations are sometimes attributed to specific individuals, but they are more frequently left uncited, a string of quotations without names, that together form a collage portrait of black life in urban America.

Interestingly, and perhaps surprising for modern students of ethnography, Drake and his fellow researchers were fully embedded in the community they studied—to the point of keeping the real reason for their presence there under wraps. It was a choice that other preeminent anthropologists—including W. Allison Davis—had made, but as the discipline

³⁵⁰ While the Chicago surrealists rarely mention Cayton in their writings, it's hard to believe that Franklin, interested in both the past and present of labor and unionism in the United States, would not have read Cayton's later studies of the effect of unionization on the labor conditions of black workers, especially his book *Black Workers and the New Unions*.

³⁵¹ St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, Jr., "Authors' Acknowledgement," in *Black Metropolis*, xiii.

³⁵² Richard Wright, "Introduction," in *Black Metropolis*, xx.

of anthropology became more developed, it was a choice that also resulted in a great deal of scrutiny and occasionally sticky questions about both the legitimacy and the morality of studying people who haven't agreed to be studied. Yet Drake was engaged with the community he studied in a way that, in his mind, legitimated the work he was doing, and the way he was doing it. "I never told Slick and Betty Lou and the others I was studying them," he told George Clement Bond in a 1988 interview. "I never made any move to organize them. Students in recent years tell me this was unethical behavior. I never felt guilty about it at the time because I was actively involved in left-wing activities that gave the illusion of helping to create a society in which the poverty and ignorance of the lower class would not be reproduced."³⁵³

Although he became skeptical in later years of the ultimate utility and accomplishments of the left-wing circles in which he was active, Drake's attraction to anthropology as a discipline was largely fueled by his interest in "generating pressure for drastic social change," and especially in using a kind of culturally-inflected historical materialism as a means of changing the real conditions of the working poor—the black working poor, to be exact—in a substantial and lasting way.³⁵⁴ Ultimately, for Drake, the impact the book was intended to have, its value as an organizing tool, outweighed the possibility of a "moral" responsibility to his subjects. Instead, he had a political responsibility—not just to the subjects in Bronzeville, but to black Americans as a whole.

Ignoring for a moment Drake's social and anthropological reasons for keeping his subjects anonymous, and focusing instead on the level of narrative, the lack of citations for the interviews in *Black Metropolis* affects the impact of the book in two important ways: first, it allows the quotations to become a part of the authors' narrative—it breaks down the

³⁵³ George Clement Bond and St. Clair Drake, "A Social Portrait of St. Clair Drake," 778.

³⁵⁴ George Clement Bond and St. Clair Drake, "A Social Portrait of St. Clair Drake," 777.

barrier between participant and observer. While the quotations are marked as such by the presence of typographical markers, the words of the participants in the study flow into those of the observers, illustrating and blending together with the more authoritative (or at least authorial) analysis. Second, the lack of citations makes possible a kind of universalizing quality to the narrative as a whole. Indeed, *Black Metropolis* is a study focused on Chicago, and on a very specific community in a very specific neighborhood in Chicago—the Black Metropolis, a “city within a city”³⁵⁵—but the story that Drake and Cayton paint in their narrative has much broader implications. “The problems that arise on Bronzeville’s Forty-seventh Street, encircle the globe,” Drake and Cayton wrote in the final chapter of the book. But, at the same time, “the fate of the Black Metropolis is dependent on the fate of the Midwest Metropolis, of the country, of the world. Forces which are in no sense local will in the final analysis determine the movement of this drama of human relations toward hope or tragedy.”³⁵⁶

“In some sense,” the sociologist Everett C. Hughes would later write of *Black Metropolis*, highlighting the book’s analysis of the role of black workers in the urban labor force, “it is a version of the story of all industrial cities, and of all poor rustics lured to the city by hope of prosperity or freedom, or driven to it by underemployment, landlessness or technological change. It is the story of a large part of the human race of times recent and to come.... *Black Metropolis* [is] more universal than the story of a single harsh new city. The themes, in various keys and combinations, are being played out in the cities of all continents.”³⁵⁷

“America is known by her big cities,” Drake and Cayton had claimed at the outset of

³⁵⁵ St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, 12.

³⁵⁶ St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, 767.

³⁵⁷ Everett C. Hughes, “1962 Introduction,” in *Black Metropolis*, xxxvi. Despite a sizeable age gap, Hughes acknowledged a debt to the work of Columbia University scholar C. Wright Mills, whose concept of the “sociological imagination” was also influential in the development of the “Chicago idea” of surrealism.

the book,

those amazing congeries of people and houses, offices and factories, which constitute the nerve centers of our civilization, the ganglia of our collective being. America is dominated by her cities as they draw into them the brawn and brain and wealth of the hinterland and give back not only a constant stream of necessities and gadgets, but also a pattern for living.³⁵⁸

It is key that we understand that *Black Metropolis* is, in part, a book about the urban imagination; it is a book that lays bare the realities of the urban future that so many poor Southern blacks dreamed of as they travelled north during the Great Migration.

For over a hundred years Midwest Metropolis has been a magnet drawing Negroes from the plantations of the rural South and from the streets of southern small towns and cities. Some were adventurers, carefree and curious. Others were the ambitious, burning with a desire to “get ahead.” Most of them were ordinary “poor folks” who had heard that there was steady work in Chicago paying wages high enough to live comfortably.³⁵⁹

Of course the reality of life in Chicago was much harsher. Though the “color-line” in Chicago was “far less rigid than that in the South,”³⁶⁰ it did exist. The great metropolis of the Midwest granted *some* equality to the blacks who migrated there—education, the right to vote, access to retail goods—but never a full equality. Segregation still existed, and still subordinated blacks to whites by denying them the right to “compete, as individuals, on equal terms with white people for economic and political power.”³⁶¹

Drake and Cayton’s study took a broader view of African American life than other

³⁵⁸ St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, 3.

³⁵⁹ St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, 99.

³⁶⁰ St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, 101.

³⁶¹ St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, 101.

sociological studies of the same era—and in some cases, the same neighborhood—did.³⁶²

Largely due to the influence of Drake's unique anthropological methods, and related in part to the larger character of the Works Progress Administration as a whole, *Black Metropolis* studied the socio-economic conditions of the residents of Bronzeville, but honed in on the cultural world that those conditions had created. "[Drake's] studies of Chicago combine quantitative and qualitative approaches to apprehend the complexities of urban life. Through a series of social dramas and vignettes, properties of class, status and ethnicity become concrete attributes of social action."³⁶³ What was interesting, especially for Drake, was the way that the patterns of migration that had led blacks to the great Midwest Metropolis had intersected with the patterns of segregation in the urban environment, and produced a city (Bronzeville) within a city (Chicago)—and, of course, the impact that the city within a city had on the folks who lived there: "America's Bronzeilles become the structures which 'protect' white America from 'social contact' with Negroes and simultaneously provide a milieu for Negro Americans in which they can imbue their lives with meaning."³⁶⁴

Richard Wright also saw the universalizing potential in the narrative of *Black Metropolis*, albeit with a slightly different inflection. For Wright, the importance of Drake and Cayton's study lay in its ability to lay bare the crude reality of black America—the same America from which Wright's own literary characters, "the Bigger Thomases of our nation," came. In his introduction to the first edition of the book, written after Wright had already left Chicago, just before his self-imposed exile in Paris, the novelist warns the readers of

³⁶² Drake was influenced by the work of the Chicago school sociologists, many of whom had written their own accounts of Negro life, several of which looked specifically at Chicago's south side population. Of particular note here are Franklin Frazier's three works, *The Negro Family in Chicago* (1932), *The Negro Family in the United States* (1939), and *Negro Youth at the Crossways* (1940), as well as Charles Johnson's *Shadow of the Plantation* (1934) and *Growing Up In the Black Belt* (1941), as well as older studies like Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess' *The City* (1925) and Louis Wirth's *The Ghetto* (1928).

³⁶³ George Clement Bond and St. Clair Drake, "A Social Portrait of St. Clair Drake," 762.

³⁶⁴ St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, "Authors' Preface to the 1962 Edition," in *Black Metropolis*, xlvii.

Black Metropolis:

This is no easy book. In order to understand it, you may have to wrench your mind rather violently out of your accustomed ways of thinking. There is no attempt in *Black Metropolis* to understate, to gloss over, to doll up, or make harsh facts pleasant for the tender-minded. The facts of urban life presented here are in their starkest form, their crudest manifestation; not because the authors want to shock you, but because the environment out of which these facts spring has so wrought them. To have presented them otherwise would have been to negate the humanity of the American Negro.³⁶⁵

As such, *Black Metropolis* became much more than an anthropological study—for Wright, it was a social critique, one accomplished simply by showing the facts, the actual everyday realities of black life in a major American metropolis. At the same time, the book also played the role, as Wright suggests, of recognizing and celebrating the humanity of the residents of Bronzeville. By restoring to them their subjectivity as members of the human race, by allowing them to exist as thinking, living subjects, rather than relegating them to a series of statistics on the page, Cayton and Drake had reinvested the black working class with the key—maybe—to its own salvation.

“[T]he American Negro, child of the culture that crushes him, wants to be free in a way that white men are free.... Negroes, but with minor exceptions, still believe in the hope of economic rewards; they believe in justice, liberty, the integrity of the individual.” Indeed, Wright continued, “[i]n the heart of industrial America is a surviving remnant, perchance a saving remnant of a passion for freedom.”³⁶⁶

Hope, it seemed, was the key for Wright; hope and a strong belief in the collective

³⁶⁵ Richard Wright, “Introduction,” in *Black Metropolis*, xix.

³⁶⁶ Richard Wright, “Introduction,” in *Black Metropolis*, xxv.

myth of America as the land of freedom and opportunity would carry the residents of Bronzeville and, by association, the entire black working class, to a better life. “Negroes,” Wright stated, “feel that they are politically and culturally Americans.”³⁶⁷ And, as such, black Americans were destined to become the heroes of the next revolution in a long tradition of anti-imperialist, anti-colonial tradition of which they were the rightful inheritors. Thus, for Wright, *Black Metropolis* was more than an explanation of black life aimed at white (scholarly) readers; rather, the book’s ultimate efficacy was in its ability to turn a mirror onto the black community, detailing the realities of everyday life, everyday race relations, so that the oppressed might see their oppression for what it was, and gather the strength, and the understanding, to fight back against it.

Drake would substantiate Wright’s claims a three decades later, in an essay published in *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*: “A few of us chose careers in anthropology forty to forty-five years ago because we believed the discipline had relevance to the liberation of black people from the devastating consequences of over four centuries of white racism,” he wrote.³⁶⁸ This relevance would largely come in the power of anthropology to demonstrate the structures that underlay the harsh realities of everyday life in such a way as to make them apparent to, understandable for, those who lived those realities. It is this interesting understanding of the power of anthropology that Wright highlights in his introduction to the book, an understanding that Drake would later suggest he first began to develop while working on the *Deep South* project:

I think that we all came out of the Mississippi experience believing that we would make a constructive contribution by simply ‘telling it like it was,’ by exposing the caste system so that those actively engaged in destroying it would have one more tool

³⁶⁷ Richard Wright, “Introduction,” in *Black Metropolis*, xxix.

³⁶⁸ St. Clair Drake, “Reflections on Anthropology and the Black Experience,” 86.

to aid them. SNCC, CORE, SCLC, and thousands of courageous individuals later did that revolutionary job.³⁶⁹

Indeed, as Margo Weiss has written, “For Drake, generalized social theory was useful for analysis, but his primary concern was with the applied, activist relevance of his ethnographic research. Bringing the tools of anthropology to social activism—uniting theory and praxis—has been one of Drake’s most enduring contributions to a politically-engaged anthropology.”³⁷⁰

Drake’s work would eventually lead him to a teaching post at Roosevelt University, where he founded the university’s first African Studies program in 1950. Given his background and the urgency with which he treated the historical and anthropological examination of everyday life, it should come as no surprise that, as a teacher at Roosevelt, Drake proved to be a major inspiration for the budding Chicago surrealists—almost all of whom were students in his classes in the mid 1960s, despite the fact that none of them ever graduated with a degree in anthropology. Though several members of the Chicago group would compose interesting works of anthropology in their later careers,³⁷¹ Drake’s impact on the surrealists was broad and wide ranging, and not limited to anthropological pursuits alone. From “nineteenth-century slave revolts, Native American uprisings, May Day, the roots of the civil rights struggle, and the revolutionary ferment in Africa” to “Négritude and the Harlem Renaissance,” Drake’s lectures pointed the way towards an interesting new world, even touching on surrealism at times, “thereby provoking a series of extended after class chats on the subject.”³⁷²

³⁶⁹ St. Clair Drake, “Reflections on Anthropology and the Black Experience,” 94.

³⁷⁰ Margo D. Weiss, “Who Was St. Clair Drake?,” Society for the Anthropology of North America (2010), available online at <http://sananet.org/drake.php> (accessed January 11, 2013).

³⁷¹ See, for example, Tor Faegre’s *Tents: Architecture of the Nomads* and Joseph Jablonski’s “Notes on the Revolution of Witchcraft.”

³⁷² Franklin Rosemont and Robin DG Kelley, *Black, Brown & Beige*, 247.

It was in the context of Drake's approach to urban anthropology that the young Chicago surrealists, especially Franklin, would begin to understand the notion of the *vernacular* as central to the surrealist project. The next, and final, chapter of this work deals specifically with the appearance of the vernacular in surrealist historiography, through an analysis of Franklin Rosemont's *Joe Hill*, perhaps the most surrealist of all histories. But, before moving on, it is worth devoting a few lines here to fully explaining exactly what the vernacular *means* in the context of American surrealism, and how it functions—like Benjamin's profane illumination (a distant, but not entirely unrelated cousin), Franklin Rosemont's vernacular surrealism is a densely layered, multi-faceted concept that works on a variety of historical and linguistic levels.

Surrealism, Rosemont argued, was defined by its ability to exceed the limits of not just genre (art, literature, philosophy, science), but geography and chronology as well. In the introduction to *The Forecast Is Hot*, a collection of the Chicago surrealists' group manifestos and collective hallucinations, Rosemont (with Paul Garon and Penelope Rosemont) writes that surrealism is "historically comparable ... to such far-ranging and self-renewing currents as alchemy, romanticism, utopianism and anarchism—currents resistant to tight definition, which have stubbornly defied the geographical and chronological limits assigned to them by critics and historians, and which have a way of turning up in new forms and new places when and where no one is looking for them."³⁷³ The vernacular was a way of addressing the question of precisely why surrealism was so resilient, why it turned up in so many places at so many times. Rather than see the vast history of surrealism as a single line of continuous development, as though surrealism originated in 1924 with Breton's manifesto and simply *progressed*, unwinding itself like a trans-historical ball of yarn, the Chicago group saw the

³⁷³ Franklin Rosemont, Penelope Rosemont, and Paul Garon, "Surrealism: The Chicago Idea," in *The Forecast Is Hot*, xii.

movement as *epochal*. Every one of surrealism's many manifestations—Paris, Fort-de-France, Port-au-Prince, Brussels, Amsterdam, Chicago, Lisbon, Prague, Portland, Philadelphia, and beyond—constituted a wholly new, radically different direction, one defined by the context in which it developed. What tied them all together, all of these vastly different moments in time and space, was *surrealism*: not a continuity, per se, but an attitude, a set of characteristics in the service of a similar goal: “[a]bsolute revolt, a no-compromise defense of the Marvelous, and a new ... kind of humour that Breton later characterized as *black*.”³⁷⁴

The surrealist manifestations were, then, best described as spatio-temporally *indigenous*, in both of its adjectival forms: specifically developed from, or characteristic of a particular geographical (and temporal) locale and, at the same time, “innate; inherent; natural.”³⁷⁵ An alternate word, one which Franklin Rosemont would use in reference to the Chicago group in particular, is “homegrown,” by which he means to differentiate Chicago surrealism from the surrealists-in-exile, and the French and German expatriates, including Breton, who first introduced the United States to surrealism in the years just before and just after World War II. The Chicago group, Rosemont argued, was America's first *homegrown* surrealist movement—not the first manifestation of surrealism on American shores, but the first truly *American* version of the movement. Similarly, surrealism in Martinique already existed, before Breton ever set foot there; though his connection with Césaire would ultimately forge a closer, and certainly a more direct link between the French surrealists and their Antillean counterparts, Caribbean surrealism was wholly its own, with a developmental trajectory steeped in and deeply colored by the colonial history of the region, and the shared history of the African diaspora, into which Césaire reaches in the *Notebook*.

³⁷⁴ Franklin Rosemont, Penelope Rosemont, and Paul Garon, “Surrealism: The Chicago Idea,” xi.

³⁷⁵ Dictionary.com definition for “indigenous,” available online at <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/indigenous> (accessed 2-23-2013).

Vernacular surrealism, though, did the concept of the indigenous, or homegrown, surrealist movement one better: it linked surrealism explicitly to the experience of the everyday, drawing its focus away from the overtness of the revolution or the uprising, and deep within the day-to-day lived reality of the context at hand. Thinking back to the discussion of Benjamin's profane illumination in an earlier chapter of the present work, we might recall the dual nature of the term: profane, in the sense of not-divine, or earthly, human; and, profane in the sense of *base*, vile, perhaps even sacrilegious. The vernacular works in much the same way. On the one hand, the vernacular is, following its linguistic definition, simply a dialect—in a cultural sense, it's the everyday street slang way of talking to one's friends and family, which is based upon, but changes, the "correct" usage of the source language. The vernacular is a non-standardized colloquial language, often identified as being "native" or "natural" as opposed to literary or learned. It might also be used to identify a particular style of speech, architecture, and so on, that's associated with a specific milieu (we might have American vernacular English, legal vernacular, vernacular architecture built from locally-sourced materials, and so on). In this sense, the vernacular shares some characteristics with the notion of the indigenous, but breaks it down even further, defining its parameters not only spatio-temporally, but culturally as well. Yet the vernacular, like the profane, also implies a judgment of worth. Derived from the Latin *vernāculus*, the term for a household slave, vernacular also means common, uneducated, even *vulgar*.

That this latter meaning was not lost on the Chicago surrealists should come as no surprise. Benjamin's celebration of the profane illumination hadn't been far off: from the movement's earliest days, the surrealists had displayed an appreciation for the non-typical, non-traditional base elements of cultural life. Seeing in madmen and witchcraft a certain possibility of emancipation, the French surrealists had embraced the fringes of the Parisian

mass. Though the Chicago group shared some, if not all, of these predilections, they seemed to be less interested in kind of shock value that defined the earliest surrealist experiments in outsider culture. The Chicago group was after a sort of cultural experience that blended the best of the two definitions of vernacular: those cultural elements—people, places, ideas, songs, and so on—that were a part of everyday people’s experiences, those things that made life in Chicago what it was, but which were explicitly *not* sanctioned by the church or the state. The market at Maxwell Street, the union hall, the old blues and jazz clubs: these all became a part of Chicago’s vernacular surrealism.

Does “vernacular,” applied here to culture, simply stand in for the now more commonly used term, “popular”? Certainly there is a relationship between the two, but Rosemont also advances a concept of the popular within the surrealist world, and, in particular, he uses the notion of surrealism’s “popular accomplices,” which include figures like Bugs Bunny and Memphis Minnie, to great effect in his cultural criticism. “It is no accident that all that is revolutionary and scandalous in the work of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel came to be symbolized, in a uniquely *umorous* way on the eve of the second world imperialist slaughter, by a little gray rabbit whose very name embodies a dialectical resolution of contradictions,” Franklin wrote in the catalog of the 1976 World Surrealist Exhibition (held, coincidentally, at the surrealists’ own Gallery Bugs Bunny in Chicago). “A more or less urbanized descendant of Br’er Rabbit, Bugs Bunny ... is categorically opposed to wage slavery in all its forms.”³⁷⁶ Surrealism’s notion of the vernacular, from which the concept of the “popular accomplice” is derived, was connected not just to the everyday, not just to popular or “lowbrow” arts, but to a very specific workingclass experience, a workingclass history like the one Drake explored in his anthropological studies of black life in Chicago,

³⁷⁶ Franklin Rosemont, “The Philosopher’s Carrot,” in *Marvelous Freedom* (Catalog of the 1978 World Surrealist Exhibition), 13.

like the one that the New Left historian E.P. Thompson had explored in early nineteenth-century England in his wildly influential *The Making of the English Working Class*, first published in 1963. Franklin would pay homage to Thompson's book with the subtitle to his own impressive account of the development of the working class in America (*The IWW and the Making of a Revolutionary Working Class Counterculture*). As we shall see in the chapter that follows, Rosemont was, like Thompson, also invested in the project of attributing agency to the working class. Surrealism, in celebrating the cultural elements of working class life, in treating the common experiences of the American working class as centrally important in the context of the worldwide struggle for collective emancipation and revolution in the service of the Marvelous, did the very same.

Chapter Seven: A Hobo's Theory of History

Over the course of the preceding chapters, I have explored a variety of central narrative figures that appear in and around surrealism; Césaire's traveler, James' narrator, and Drake's participant-observer all share qualities and characteristics with Aragon's *flâneur*, Breton's alchemist, and Benjamin's storyteller. Simultaneously inside and outside the world they document, both an agent of history and an observer of the same, these "characters" are the privileged subjects of their moments, the axis around which so many things revolve, the convenient window "onto the beyond" that captivated Breton and infuriated Trotsky, and ultimately defined the notion of the Marvelous within everyday life.³⁷⁷ The surrealist historical agent moves through his surroundings, an active participant in the world around him, yet never fully engaged in the activities of others. He is not the revolutionary subject, per se; there is a reason, for example, that James (and Melville, himself) uses the figure of Ishmael as his narrative agent: Ahab, Queequeg, and Tashtego are the revolutionary subjects of *Moby Dick*. They are the agents of change, the totalitarian leader and colonial subjects whose relationship to the world around them, and to each other, define the microcosm of American capitalism that James is ultimately interested in uncovering. But it is Ishmael who narrates the events that take place; Ishmael who tells us the personal stories of these agents of change; Ishmael who is there, but is not there, who names himself, who chooses, from the very start of the book, how he will be referred to, and what role he will play in the story. It is Ishmael who *allows himself* to be carried along on the winds of change, who is compelled to take to the sea at varying intervals, but who may step off of the boat, out of the sea (the world of American capitalism, in James' analysis), at any moment of his own choosing. He is

³⁷⁷ André Breton, "Visit with Leon Trotsky," in *What Is Surrealism?*, 239.

carried along, but only insofar as he chooses to allow himself to be so. He is the revolutionary traveller, the man who is able to dip in and out of epochal moments at his leisure, who is conversant with the winds of chance, and blessed with the uncanny ability to weave the multifarious stories of a group of men thrown together by chance, into a meaningful narrative.

To allow oneself to be carried along by the winds of chance—in fact to position oneself in such a way as to be open to the Marvelous should it appear unexpectedly, should it flash up and be, for an instant, recognizable—and to define a trajectory on the basis of chance itself; what could possibly be a more surrealist approach to the work of historiography? As we have already seen, the surrealists were pre-disposed towards a quasi-Hegelian impulse to exploit the tension between diametrically opposed forces for revolutionary ends. On a historiographic level, these same theoretical principles apply: refusing to be bound by the limitations of traditional chronology and geography, the surrealists saw a constellation of people, places, events, and ideas where others saw only a jumble of time. Indeed, to read a surrealist history is to see the world through an entirely different set of eyes—this is not “history as it really was,” but history as, perhaps, it might have been.³⁷⁸ Indeed, surrealism’s historiography is history told from the standpoint of the imagination.

Though Breton had, of course, already sanctified this process and project of re-writing history according to the epistemology of chance and madness in the first manifesto, it is the Chicago group who pushed the concept to its limits. American surrealism’s historical agent *par excellence* is undoubtedly Wobbly Joe Hill, the hobo agitator of the Industrial

³⁷⁸ “Articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it ‘the way it really was.’ It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger.... Every age must strive anew to wrest tradition away from the conformism that is working to overpower it” (Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 4*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings [Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2003], 391).

Workers of the World, the freewheeling poet and songwriter who is at the center of the historiographic *magnum opus* of the American movement, Franklin Rosemont's *Joe Hill: The IWW and the Making of a Revolutionary Workingclass Counterculture*. Published in 2002 by the Charles H. Kerr Company, and weighing in at over 650 pages ("four or five times longer than I intended," according to Franklin³⁷⁹), *Joe Hill* is one of—if not *the*—greatest works of surrealist history ever conceived. Every page is filled with extraordinary details, uncanny coincidences, humorous anecdotes, and more—a vertiable curio cabinet of early Americana, treating not only the life and death of one of the most beloved figures in twentieth century labor struggles, but also the history of cartooning, the history of American poetry, the birth and development of the labor movement in the United States from coast to coast, the struggle for women's rights, the earliest moments of interracial organizing in the United States, and the development of a very particular strain of workingclass counterculture, in addition to defending copyright infringement, lauding the birth of sticker art, and discussing the love of Chinese cookery as a possible indicator of anti-racist sentiment. Reading it is like taking a romp through the Smithsonian National Archives and the Labadie Collection³⁸⁰ rolled into one, with a collection of hidden staircases leading from one reading room to the next. It is one of the most vibrant, and imaginative works of history ever written, on a par with Benjamin's *Arcades Project* and, indeed, E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, and it is one of the best books of the twentieth century that virtually no one has ever read.

From one perspective, the lack of attention for the book in the academic world isn't

³⁷⁹ Franklin Rosemont, *Joe Hill: The IWW and the Making of a Revolutionary Workingclass Counterculture* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Company, 2002), 595.

³⁸⁰ The Joseph A. Labadie Collection at the University of Michigan is the oldest radical history research collection in the United States. Besides a particularly rich collection of labor-related materials and materials related to the I.W.W., the collection also now houses the archive of Franklin Rosemont's correspondence, as well as his unpublished manuscripts and other materials related to the Chicago Surrealist Group.

surprising. Despite the intellectual *rigor* of the book, the years of oral and written interviews with old-time IWW members, the countless collections and other archival sources documented, and the extensive bibliography, *Joe Hill* is not a scholarly treatise. Rosemont was a self-taught historian, a man who began the project of documenting American workingclass counterculture simply because he was fascinated by it, and because he recognized the urgency of capturing the stories, the personalities, the details before they slipped away entirely, forgotten by a new generation. Few reviews of the book have appeared in the decade since its publication, save for those in the left-leaning and socialist press—including, most notably, an excellent treatment from historian Peter Linebaugh (himself a surrealist fellow traveler, and a highly imaginative scholar). *Joe Hill* is, according to Linebaugh, “the right man by the right biographer at the right time.”³⁸¹ As a work of *surrealism*, the book has been almost entirely ignored by the critics, which is not surprising when one considers the lack of attention paid to the Chicago surrealist group as a whole by art historians and scholars alike.³⁸²

From another perspective, though, the lack of attention for the book—either as a work of history or as a work of surrealism—is baffling. While *Joe Hill* may defy traditional notions of what history (or surrealism) is supposed to look like, while some of its conclusions may lead even the most sympathetic of readers to raise a quizzical eyebrow, if one troubles to actually *read* the book, it’s hard to ignore the impressive original research contained therein, and the many details that Rosemont includes that significantly deepen and, in many cases, completely change our understanding not just of Joe Hill, the man and the martyr, but of the development of a very specifically American workingclass culture as a

³⁸¹ Peter Linebaugh, “Rhymesters and Revolutionaries: Joe Hill and the IWW,” in *CounterPunch* (October 3-5, 2003), available online at <http://www.counterpunch.org/2003/10/03/joe-hill-and-the-iww/> (accessed 2-24-2013).

³⁸² In 2004, as the editorial assistant of the Comparative Literature issue of *Modern Language Notes*, I published one of the few reviews, laudatory or otherwise, of the book in the academic press, largely thanks to the support of the journal’s extraordinarily imaginative editor, Richard Macksey. See *Modern Language Notes* 119.5 (2004): 1120-1124.

whole. For Rosemont, the devil is, indeed, in the details; he fixates on the surprising moments he uncovers, the throwaway references in an interview, or a newspaper article, which most people simply gloss over, teasing out the larger meaning behind the mentions, uncovering a web of uncanny connections that, when viewed as a whole, provide a larger patchwork quilt of an American workingclass tradition with culture at its center.

What fascinates Rosemont about Joe Hill is fact that someone so well known could also be so *unknown* at the same time. Although Rosemont makes a case for Hill's legacy as an IWW songwriter and cultural worker, his fame comes primarily from the circumstances surrounding his death: an itinerant worker and a Wobbly, Hill was accused in January 1914 of the murder of a grocery store owner and his son—a murder that Hill, and many others, claimed he didn't commit³⁸³—and executed before the firing squad in Salt Lake City, Utah, on November 19, 1915, an execution arguably meant to send a warning to other members of the radical union: you're not welcome here. Hill's body was eventually shipped back to Chicago (IWW General Headquarters) and cremated, and his ashes divided into 600 packets to be mailed to locals, branches, and individual IWW members around the world, with the intention that Hill's remains be scattered to the winds—a fitting tribute for a hobo, a man always on the move, always looking toward the next stop along the rails. The stories of what happened to each of those packets of ashes are union lore by this point—every so often, a packet of Joe Hill's ashes will turn up, in the personal effects of old union members, and occasionally in the possession of the government, who confiscated at least a few of the

³⁸³ There is a significant body of literature that discusses the circumstances of Hill's case, and debates the question of his innocence. Hill had been treated for a gunshot wound the day of the murders, which he claimed to have received in a quarrel over a woman. Yet he refused to provide the woman's name or to give any detail about the situation in which he sustained his injury, leading the jury to assume the story was a lie. A new biography of Hill published in 2011, however, reproduces a letter by Hilda Erikson, a relative of the family who owned the boarding house where Hill was staying at the time, that confirms her relationship with Hill, and corroborates his story. See William M. Adler, *The Man Who Never Died, The Life, Times, and Legacy of Joe Hill, American Labor Icon* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011).

packets from the US Postal Service, and a new round of memorial celebrations will begin. Hill, who had indeed been tolerably well-known as a songwriter and travelling worker during his life, became a far greater and more important figure than he ever could have imagined; Joe Hill is, today, a symbol of workingclass resistance and solidarity, a figure revered and celebrated around the world, steeped in symbolism and legend that members of the IWW have continued to encourage through the years. It's precisely *that* history that Rosemont wants to explore.

The actual details of Hill's life that Rosemont is able to uncover through a combination of archival research, conversations with older union members, and educated guesswork are interesting, but primarily for the portrait they paint of the life of immigrant workers in the United States in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Born Joel Emmanuel Hägglund on October 7, 1879 in Gävle, Sweden, Hill emigrated to the United States in 1902 after the death of his mother, who had never recovered from a long illness.³⁸⁴ Once in the United States, Hill began to travel looking for work, traversing the country numerous times, narrating the union's strikes and struggles through his songs and occasional poems, joining picket lines from time to time, riding the rails and living in the hobo jungle. Though very little is known of Hill's early life or the years immediately following his arrival in New York, Rosemont provides a lovely description of Hill upon his arrival in America:

When he reached New York at the age of twenty-two, the man we know as Joe Hill was six feet tall, slim, with deep blue eyes and dark brown hair. A handful of undated photos show him as a handsome, intelligent, serious, and thoughtful young man, bold and unafraid; more hobo than poet, perhaps, but with a strong sense of humor and a dreamer's twinkle in his eye—the opposite, one might say, of a TV anchorman

³⁸⁴ Hill's father had passed away in 1887, leaving Hill, his mother, and his six siblings in poverty. See Rosemont, *Joe Hill*, 44-45.

or an insurance executive.³⁸⁵

There are precious few accounts of Hill's life between 1902 and 1912, leading one to wonder about the veracity of Rosemont's claims. Though Hill's physical attributes are easily verified (despite the fact that the surviving photographs of Hill, who died in 1917, are black and white), little documentation exists to support Rosemont's claims about Hill's temperament, that he was more "hobo" than "poet," and altogether unlike an anchorman or insurance executive.³⁸⁶ The question is whether or not that matters; Rosemont proceeds on the basis of impressions, anecdotes, stories, tall tales, and hearsay, stitching together bits and pieces of commentary about Hill, mentions of the young hobo in accounts of key strikes and other events at the time, developing a portrait of Hill that shows him "as those who knew him best saw him ... [as an] exemplar of a workingclass counterculture that continues to embody our greatest hopes for the future."³⁸⁷

The imposition of the present—and the future—onto the historical task that Franklin sets out for himself in the *Joe Hill* book is important; he begins the book with a quote from Jean François Paul de Gondi: "Illuminate the past by the future."³⁸⁸ Though he does devote a significant number of chapters to Hill's personal history and development, as well as a few chapters to the situation surrounding Hill's arrest and execution in Salt Lake City, *Joe Hill's* focused biographical data ends around page 155. The rest of the book is devoted to an expansive assessment of the racial, gender, social, economic, and poetic politics of the IWW told through a series of anecdotes about Hill's various acquaintances, his songs and poems, and his artwork. Hill is, indeed, the subject of Rosemont's book, but

³⁸⁵ Franklin Rosemont, *Joe Hill*, 45.

³⁸⁶ Though sources are cited throughout the *Joe Hill* book, their regularity and frequency is maddeningly confusing, and rarely, if ever, are page numbers given. Rosemont provides readers with a trail of sources to follow, but leaves it up to the reader to do the work of reconstructing the historian's path through Joe Hill's life and legacy.

³⁸⁷ Franklin Rosemont, *Joe Hill*, 6.

³⁸⁸ Franklin Rosemont, *Joe Hill*, 1.

what's at stake is less the meticulous details of the hobo's life than the unusually rich sphere of influence that seems to have developed around him. Hill represents something far greater than himself—a window onto a very different world from the one in which he lived, a world that Rosemont and his fellows surrealists continue to fight for. As Rosemont writes,

[S]o it came to pass that Joe Hill entered mass consciousness—as a “real” historic figure, but even more as a folk hero and *symbol*: a multi-faceted symbol of the downtrodden rising in revolt. In the light of Jean Toomer's observation (1931) that “A symbol is as useful to the spirit as a tool is to the hand,” it is clear that Hill's symbolic life has been unusually salutatory in this respect. Like freedom and solidarity, Joe Hill is one and indivisible, but as a symbol, dynamic and protean, he has represented many different elements in humankind's long, hard struggle against Leviathan.³⁸⁹

Hill is both a product of and a producer of the culture that celebrates him. Just as James would write that Touissant didn't create the Haitian revolution so much as the revolution created him, Franklin Rosemont sees Joe Hill as a symbol both necessary and integral to the struggle for workingclass emancipation in the United States. Or, perhaps more bluntly, “Joe Hill” as we know him today—immortalized in song, in film, in fiction, and on the stage—is simply a story—but a necessary one. Of course there was a real Joe Hill; Rosemont goes to great lengths to uncover as many details about Hill's life as he possibly can, a task he completes with great historiographical acumen. And, the real Joe Hill was remarkable in many ways: he seems to have been well-liked by all of his contemporaries, selfless and honest, hardworking and serious, a talented songwriter with a strong sense of humor. Rosemont's portrayal of Joe Hill as a man cognizant of the great beauty in the everyday

³⁸⁹ Franklin Rosemont, *Joe Hill*, 3.

world around him seems apt, and the stories and anecdotes Hill's friends tell, coupled with his surviving body of work indicate that Joe Hill was devoted to the union's fight for dignity and beauty for all workers.

But Rosemont's assessment of Joe Hill isn't limited to biographical details; rather, the case he makes is that Joe Hill, the man, was ultimately the living embodiment of the culture within which he existed: the personification of revolutionary counterculture of the working class, best exemplified by the most culturally-astute of all of the unions, the IWW. And, simultaneously, Hill, as symbol, becomes exactly that which this revolutionary workingclass counterculture *needs* to sustain itself: a hero, a symbol of hope and solidarity. What Franklin traces over the course of the latter two-thirds of the book is precisely the way this counterculture came to exist, and the way it influenced Joe Hill during his life, and the way Hill's death influenced the culture within which he lived, and the ways that influence shaped the memory of Hill, turning the hobo poet into "the man who never died."³⁹⁰

It is this dialectical tension that makes Joe Hill the ideal subject for the kind of vernacular surrealist history that Rosemont wants to write. Joe Hill is constructed by the working-class consciousness he wants to create. His influence as Rosemont describes it—on the IWW, on other radicals and artists, on social movements from the 1920s to today—often feels disproportionate to the actual accomplishments Hill made during his life and with his death, but, as Rosemont argues, the ability of the playful yet profound workingclass counterculture in the United States to construct a near-mythic figure capable of inspiring and inciting solidarity in generation after generation of workers on the basis of the memory of an unassuming hobo songwriter from Sweden points toward something remarkable about both

³⁹⁰ The phrase recurs frequently, but one of the most well-known uses comes in Alfred Hayes' poem "I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hill Last Night," which was set to music by Earl Robinson in 1936, and popularized by Pete Seeger and Joan Baez, the latter of whom performed the song at Woodstock in 1969. As the song goes, "I dreamed I saw Joe Hill last night / alive as you and me. / Says I, 'But Joe, you're ten years dead.' / 'I never died,' says he."

Joe Hill and the culture he came to represent.

Ultimately, the true importance of the *Joe Hill* book is not the details that Franklin uncovers about Hill's life and death; certainly, the facts are interesting, the research impressive, and the conclusions illuminating. But what *matters* is where the facts came from, and the process by which Rosemont uncovers them—Joe Hill isn't the revolutionary subject in Rosemont's book. Rather, Hill occupies the position of the narrative agent, moving through history, never fully in the American counterculture that Rosemont studies, yet never fully apart from it either, unable to exist except by virtue of his relationship to the culture that in turn depends upon him. He is the hobo-*flâneur*, the participant-observer, the agent around which Rosemont spins a historical trajectory that stretches from Haymarket to Chicago surrealism. The true revolutionary subjects of the *Joe Hill* book are the people that Hill encounters on his travels, the Wobblies and working folks who knew him best, who Rosemont takes great pains to track down—in person, when possible, and otherwise through their songs, stories, poems, and drawings, as well the reminiscences of others. So many old Wobblies whose names were all but forgotten by the time Rosemont rediscovered them, celebrating their struggles, paying homage to their lives and work by assigning to them a place within the *Joe Hill* history.

Rosemont's reasons for wanting to explore the making of workingclass counterculture in the United States should, by now, be easy to understand:

“Ordinary” folk—footloose workers, students, poets, the unemployable, misfits, and dreamers of all kinds—have proceeded to “discover” the IWW for themselves, willy-nilly and hit-or-miss. Songs, songbooks, concerts, records; history, sociology, biography, fiction books: These are just a few of the uncountable ways in which people have stumbled upon the Wobblies and thereby changed forever their way of

looking at the past and at contemporary social reality.... In a society dominated by liars and their lies, young rebels recognized those old hoboes with their red cards as the bearers of marvelous truths.³⁹¹

The legacy and lore of the IWW is interesting precisely because of its relationship to and its seemingly never-ending draw for “ordinary,” or in surrealist terms, “everyday” folks. While Franklin notes that a true history of the “discoveries” of the union is largely impossible, since “the union is still constantly being discovered,”³⁹² there is one story of discovery that he does include in the *Joe Hill* book, and it’s worth quoting at length:

The paths to the rediscovery of Joe Hill’s union were extraordinarily diverse and circuitous, but they helped a lot of people break out of the repressive Fifties into the revolutionary Sixties.

Not the least of these paths was *poetry*. For me, indeed, and for many of my friends—and I am sure for many others—poetry was vitally important in our introduction to the IWW. The union’s historical and ongoing emphasis on poetry and song immediately impressed us as one of the decisive qualities that made it unique among labor and left organizations. And we were right: That the IWW produced and inspired more and better poetry than all other unions combined serves not only to distinguish it from all other unions, but also tells us a lot about the kind of world it was trying to build.

It was as poets that many of us came to discover the IWW, and the more we got to know the union, its history, art, and lore, the more we loved it. We found the IWW the same way we found surrealism, free jazz, certain films, S.P. Dinsmoor’s “Garden of Eden,” *The Hermetic Museum*, and the poetry of Sam Greenberg, Mina

³⁹¹ Franklin Rosemont, *Joe Hill*, 422.

³⁹² Franklin Rosemont, *Joe Hill*, 422.

Loy, and Bob Kaufman: fortuitously but *necessarily*, because—without even knowing it—we were searching for it.³⁹³

It is notable that Rosemont includes his own relationship to the IWW in the context of the *Joe Hill* book, and the importance of this fact is deeply related to the *process* of historiography that the *Joe Hill* book exemplifies. Rosemont doesn't simply write about Joe Hill's life; he experiences it. Rosemont and Hill are connected by virtue of an epistemological trajectory much like the one that connected the Parisian surrealists and their counterparts in Port-au-Prince, Fort-de-France, Prague, Chicago, and all points beyond. If Rosemont is able to successfully present Joe Hill's union as imbued with the same spirit of poetic revolt that he sees at work in surrealism, free jazz, and so on, then it is because this is the way that he, himself, experienced the union. Rosemont's discovery of the IWW in the 1960s was fortuitous—though the union's potential as a radical labor organizing body was small by that point, Rosemont recognized the enormous cultural value of the union and the communities around it, and worked, with the help of Penelope and the other Chicago comrades, to restore the IWW's culture and community, albeit with slight changes to appeal to a new context and a new generation of workers. "From the start," Rosemont argues, "creative self-expression was an important part of the IWW's emphasis on education, organization and emancipation."³⁹⁴ And, Rosemont is not wrong: when one looks back at the wealth of materials produced by the international IWW community over the course of the past century, and continuing up to the present day, one can't help but be impressed by how *extraordinarily* creative the union was. Few other workingclass political movements of the same era—and certainly no other unions—boast so many songs, images, newspapers, pamphlets, handbills, broadsheets, poems, pageants, and other cultural objects as the IWW.

³⁹³ Franklin Rosemont, *Joe Hill*, 423.

³⁹⁴ Franklin Rosemont, *Joe Hill*, 65.

The Wobblies were a labor union, but their aim was to change everyday reality. Not content to simply improve the labor conditions of the working class, the IWW wanted to build a different life for workers, starting with an increased sense of autonomy in their everyday lives, and autonomy that could be gained not just through direct struggle against the powers that be—the government and the bosses alike—but also through the freedom of thought. The IWW prioritized both education and entertainment in its organizing work, and tempered it all with a strong dose of self-referential humor, designed not to distract the workers from the harsh realities of wage slavery in the United States, but to free the mind from the strictures of capitalist oppression, to remind workers that while their bodies might be controlled by the bosses, their minds were not.

As one might expect, the IWW's cultural creators—Joe Hill among them—were important figures in union life. As John Reed wrote in *The Liberator* in 1918, just a few years after Hill's execution,

I have met men carrying next to their hearts, in the pocket of their working-clothes, little bottles with some of Joe Hill's ashes in them. Over Bill Haywood's desk in National headquarters is a painted portrait of Joe Hill, very moving, done with love. I know no other group of Americans which so honors its singers.³⁹⁵

And, Reed speculated, with good reason: “When you hear these songs, you’ll know it is the American Social Revolution you are listening to.”³⁹⁶ Indeed, as John Pietaro notes in his essay on the IWW and protest songs, Wobbly musicians seem to have existed since at least 1906, just one year after the union's founding.³⁹⁷ The union first launched the famous *The Little Red Songbook* in 1909, a collection of songs “To Fan the Flames of Discontent,” as its

³⁹⁵ John Reed, “The Social Revolution in Court,” *The Liberator*, September 1918. Reprinted in John Reed, *The Education of John Reed* (New York: International Publishers, 1955): 179-181.

³⁹⁶ John Reed, “The Social Revolution in Court.”

³⁹⁷ John Pietaro, “Solidarity Forever: The IWW and the Protest Song,” *The Cultural Worker* (December 27, 2010), available online at http://laborfightback.org/elc/cultural_iww.htm (accessed 9-2-2013).

cover proclaimed, which was updated continuously over the course of the union's life, kept in print throughout the 1970s and 1980s by the Charles H. Kerr Company under the direction of the Rosemonts, and recently republished in a vastly updated edition by the union's cultural committee in 2011. 1909 also saw the beginning of the Wobbly free speech fights in the Pacific Northwest, a series of important actions that helped to position the IWW as a fighting union defined by their highly creative protest tactics.³⁹⁸

IWW songs took many forms, but often times they involved setting new lyrics to popular or well-known tunes of the day. The most famous IWW song, "Solidarity Forever," is set to the tune of "John Brown's Body," a civil war marching song whose lyrics had been rewritten in 1961 by Julia Ward Howe and released as the more popular "The Battle Hymn of the Republic": rewriting the lyrics yet again in 1915, IWW musician Ralph Chaplin took the near-ubiquitous tune and modified it, so that lyrics which originally ran "Glo-ry, glory hal-le-lu-jah" became "Sol-i-dar-ity for-ev-er!" Joe Hill's earliest IWW song was also set to the tune of a well-known song: a parody of the hymn "In the Sweet By and By" with a chorus that runs:

You will eat, bye and bye,
In that glorious land above the sky;
Work and pray, live on hay,
You'll get pie in the sky when you die.

The song, in addition to popularizing the phrase "pie in the sky," which the Wobblies used time and again to describe their utopian vision for the working class, quickly established Hill as a promising songwriter for the union. As John Greenway writes in his history of *American Folksongs of Protest*,

³⁹⁸ On this point, see John Duda, "Introduction," in *Wanted! Men to Fill the Jails of Spokane: Fighting for Free Speech with the Hobo Agitators of the IWW* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Company, 2009), 6.

One evening late in 1910 Joe Hill walked into the Portland, Oregon IWW hall with a song he had written to the tune of the popular Salvation Army gospel hymn, “In the Sweet Bye and Bye.” He gave it to the secretary of the local, George Reese, who handed it to Mac McClintock, the local’s “busker” or tramp entertainer. Mac sang it to the men idling in the hall, and the tremendous applause that greeted its rendition convinced Reese that they had something. He and McClintock revised the song, and printed it in their little song leaflet which two years later was adopted by the IWW as the official songbook of the union. Hill was invited to join the Wobblies, and so began his fabulous career.³⁹⁹

The songs of the Salvation Army were particularly good fodder for IWW parodies: in Spokane in 1909, the first IWW marching band had formed specifically for the purposes of parodying the Salvation Army whose extremely loud band had a habit of turning up wherever the Wobblies gathered to soapbox and organize to drown out the union members’ speeches. Led by the socialist agitator Jack Walsh, a group of Wobblies pulled together costumes and instruments, learned a few union songs, including a parody or two of the Salvation Army Band songs, and turned up whenever the Salvation Army did to drown out their band in turn. It was a clever, playful way of solving a problem, and while the IWW certainly wasn’t the first marching band ever to exist on the left, the Spokane Wobbly band is undoubtedly the forerunner of today’s radical marching bands, which have become increasingly popular in recent years as tools for creative disruption.⁴⁰⁰

Rosemont sees this playful practice as on a par with the more self-consciously avant-garde strategy of *détournement*—put to great use by the surrealists and the situationists in later years—and notes that it didn’t stop with music; it was common to find other well-known

³⁹⁹ John Greenway, *American Folksongs of Protest* (New York: AS Barnes, 1953), 185.

⁴⁰⁰ See John Duda, “Introduction” to *Wanted! Men to Fill the Jails of Spokane*, 6.

verses rewritten in the signature Wobbly style, many of which poked fun at religion. A particularly well-known example is T-Bone Slim's "Lumberjack's Prayer":

I pray dear Lord for Jesus' sake
Give us this day a T Bone steak
Hallowed be thy holy name
But don't forget to send the same

Oh hear my humble cry, oh Lord
And send me down some decent board
Brown gravy and some German fried
With sliced tomatoes on the side

Observe me on my bended legs
I'm asking you for ham and eggs
And if thou havest custard pies
I like, dear Lord, the largest size...⁴⁰¹

A sly revision of the classic "Lord's Prayer," Slim's verse was printed "on a wallet-size card-stock in a deliberate imitation of a 'holy card,' and sold for a dime," making it "a popular item at IWW street meetings."⁴⁰²

Humor—both dry wit and out-and-out hilarity—played a strong role in the culture of the IWW. Rosemont devotes considerable space in the *Joe Hill* book to a discussion of the history of comics and cartooning in early twentieth century radical left culture, collecting for the first time almost all of Joe Hill's cartoons, many of which were published in the *Industrial*

⁴⁰¹ The full text of Slim's verse is available online in the IWW document repository at <http://www.iww.org/unions/dept100/iu120/scribner/Scribner21.shtml> (accessed 9-2-2013).

⁴⁰² Franklin Rosemont, *Joe Hill*, 553.

Worker, *Class War News*, *One Big Union Monthly*, and the *International Socialist Review* during his life. Cartoons are important, Rosemont argues, because they evade capitalist logic:

In the very distortion and unreality of cartooning lies the secret of its delight and therefore its power. The more vividly these cartoons depicted the absurdity of capitalism and its impending demise, the more they satisfied and reassured the wage-slave readers of the Wobbly press.... Hill's "scribbling" [as he referred to his penchant for drawing] as a cartoonist served to reinforce and stimulate the IWW's community of desires and daydreams—the shared hopes, reveries, and expectations of a consciously revolutionary working class.⁴⁰³

For Rosemont and for many, many others, Joe Hill represents the refusal to capitulate to the demands of an increasingly capitalist society, a project that Rosemont also sees at work in surrealism, with its conscious refusal of the stultifying logic of the waking world. If Rosemont includes Joe Hill in his list of surrealism's popular accomplices—devoting an entire chapter of the *Joe Hill* book to "The IWW Counterculture & Vernacular Surrealism,"—it is precisely on the grounds of Hill's "rejection of realism" that this inclusion is made. As Rosemont writes in the "Vernacular Surrealism" chapter,

It is a fact that many of Joe Hill's best-known songs—"Casey Jones," "Mr Block," "Stung Right" and his raucous paean to sabotage, "Ta-Ra-Ra-Boom-De-Ay"—remind us more of the vaudevillian rowdiness of Jaroslav Hasek's *Good Soldier Svejk* and Tex Avery's *Bad Luck Blackie* than they do of, say, the soberly naturalistic novels of Theodor Dreiser or the films of Sergei Eisenstein. Strictly speaking, these songs may not be "surrealist," but their wacky characters, phantasmagoric slapstick, and no-holds-barred black humor are well beyond the grasp of any sort of "realist"

⁴⁰³ Franklin Rosemont, *Joe Hill*, 165.

aesthetic.... Hill's [work] prefigures the chief aim of the Wobblies' revolutionary counterculture: to enable individual workers as well as the working class as a whole to discover their own originality. To fellow Wobbly poets, songwriters, and artists, Hill's legacy was loud and clear: *humor and imagination all the way!*⁴⁰⁴

The emphasis on imagination, on humor, and above all on *play* is critical if we are to fully understand and appreciate the core message of Rosemont's analysis of Joe Hill and the culture of the IWW. Rosemont wonders, in an earlier chapter of the book, why it is so rarely the case that men like Joe Hill are recognized as great revolutionary figures, and concludes that it has to do with a certain belief that revolution must be "serious" stuff; Rosemont doesn't want to diminish the importance or the gravity of the proletarian revolution, but, echoing Breton, he suggests that the revolution is only complete when it includes a *complete* revolution of the mind, not just a change in the social and political order. He is less interested in the great orators and the commanding officers in the great battles of the class war than he is in the largely forgotten, or at least unnamed, members of the working class who carried out small "guerrilla skirmishes" on the borders of the very same: "ranging from workplace restroom graffiti and clowning on the job to property-damaging pranks and outright sabotage ... [these are] hidden or disguised manifestations of revolt."⁴⁰⁵

In his 1994 book, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*, which was well known to Franklin and the other Chicago surrealists, Robin DG Kelley suggests that "politics is not separate from the lived experience or the imaginary world of what is possible."⁴⁰⁶ Rosemont builds on this axiom in the *Joe Hill* book, and suggests that what sets the revolutionary counterculture of the IWW apart—what makes it truly revolutionary—is

⁴⁰⁴ Franklin Rosemont, *Joe Hill*, 526-27.

⁴⁰⁵ Franklin Rosemont, *Joe Hill*, 507.

⁴⁰⁶ Robin DG Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 9.

its ability to operate in both of these spheres at the same time. Influenced by Kelley's work on the black working class in America, Franklin devotes several chapters to the race politics of Joe Hill and the IWW, looking specifically at this question of how small everyday acts worked to shape and develop a much broader racial consciousness.

For the Chicago surrealists, the IWW held a certain fascination as one of the first sites of interracial solidarity in early twentieth century American culture. While much has been made of the Communist Party's attempts to integrate and organize black workers fields, as the celebrated poet Claude McKay would point out in 1923, "only the IWW has truly accepted Blacks as equals in their organization."⁴⁰⁷ Whereas the Communist Party was interested in *organizing black workers*, the IWW simply accepted blacks as Fellow Workers.⁴⁰⁸ This distinction is a critical one: the IWW, like the Surrealists, accepted and recognized the existence—and necessity—of a uniquely "Black experience," but recognized that this experience was a part of a larger constellation of experiences, each one unique and irreducible, that shaped and defined a worker's worldview. Wobblies recognized the similarities between the experiences of workers of different races; as an industrial union, the IWW grouped workers together according to the industry in which they worked, regardless of skill or trade. To be clear, the IWW didn't seek to supplant the black experience with an industrial one, didn't suggest that blacks stop thinking about themselves as blacks, and start thinking about themselves as workers; whereas the Community Party's strategy for organizing the black workers in the fields was to present the Party and organized labor as a way *out* of the experience of oppression—to simply invite workers into a new identity, as *workers*—a Wobbly could, indeed, be a black worker, in every sense of the term. The IWW didn't seek to erase race from the experience of workers; it simply included race as another

⁴⁰⁷ Franklin Rosemont, *Joe Hill*, 67.

⁴⁰⁸ It is IWW tradition for members to refer to each other as "Fellow Workers."

defining element of the workingclass experience of America. Again recalling James, racial epistemology was simply a part of what black workers brought to the “common rendezvous” of humanity that Rosemont sees exemplified in the IWW’s revolutionary counterculture.

Rosemont focuses on the small, everyday moments of solidarity that define the relationship of blacks and whites—and folks of all colors, and genders, and creeds—within the IWW. He includes a whole section, for example, on the importance of Chinese cookery within the union, collecting the numerous references to meetings held in Chinese restaurants, highlighting the fact that at least one of the stories of how the IWW members came to be called “Wobblies” features a Chinese cook prominently, and speculating that Joe Hill’s willingness to “proclaim [his] passion for Chinese food and flaunt [his] knack for using chopsticks [qualifies] as dissidence and defiance.... In his own quiet way, Joe Hill let it be known that he was friendly to the Chinese and therefore, at least to that extent, a foe to white supremacy.”⁴⁰⁹ In fact, as Rosemont goes on to claim,

In the face of widespread anti-Chinese agitation, the IWW defended a thoroughgoing proletarian internationalism, denounced proponents of “Chinese exclusion,” warmly welcomed Chinese workers into the union, and even held meetings in Chinese restaurants. Yet another indication of their complete rejection of white-supremacist “Yellow Peril” mythology was their promotion of a Chinese cook to a high place in the union’s own revolutionary mythology.⁴¹⁰

This fluidity in the realm of identity is important, and it harkens back to the surrealist politics of equality that the Rosemonts and the Chicago group worked so hard to define and expand in the midst of the Sixties countercultural revolution. *Equality* in surrealism is not the

⁴⁰⁹ Franklin Rosemont, *Joe Hill*, 246.

⁴¹⁰ Franklin Rosemont, *Joe Hill*, 251.

same thing as *equivalence*. To say that the dream-state and the waking-world, theory and practice, man and woman, and all other diametrically opposed forces are brought into equilibrium in the surrealist experience of the world is not to say that one side of each pair becomes interchangeable with the other; nor is it to say that one simply replaces the other. Rather, what is at stake is an experience in which each element of the pair can exist simultaneously and in equal measure with the other.

Surrealism, Franklin wrote in his “Vernacular Surrealism” chapter in the *Joe Hill* book, “is emphatically *not* an ideology.... As an organized movement, surrealism has had many theorists, but surrealism is by no means a theory. Indeed, it is not even an *ism* in the sense of ‘doctrine or system,’ but rather in the sense of ‘condition of being’ or ‘activities or qualities characteristic of.’”⁴¹¹ One cannot help but be reminded of the scorn with which Breton attacks the French Communist Party for their refusal to accept the notion that one could be both a surrealist and a Marxist at once: “two years ago,” he wrote in the Second Manifesto, “I was personally unable to cross the threshold of the French Communist Party headquarters, freely and unnoticed as I desired, that same threshold where so many undesirable characters, policemen and others, have the right to gambol and frolic at will. In the course of three interrogations ... I had to defend Surrealism from the puerile accusation that it was essentially a political movement with a strong anticommunist and counterrevolutionary orientation.... ‘If you’re a Marxist,’ Michel Marty bawled at one of us at about that same time, ‘you have no need to be a Surrealist.’”⁴¹² Breton, of course, would beg to differ on that point, a difference that would ultimately cost him any possibility of Party membership, and set in motion the final definitive break with organized political parties. “The mind is not a weathervane,” he continues in the second manifesto, “It is not enough to

⁴¹¹ Franklin Rosemont, *Joe Hill*, 524.

⁴¹² André Breton, “Second Manifesto of Surrealism,” 142.

simply decide that one must devote oneself to a specific activity.”⁴¹³ For Breton, surrealism and Marxism had complementary goals and, indeed, could be combined in complementary ways, as is certainly true in the case of Walter Benjamin; but surrealism could not be *replaced* by Marxism. It wasn’t necessary, or even *possible*, to simply stop being a surrealist and become a Marxist instead—one was not commensurate with the other!

That same irreducibility of one experience to another is precisely what Franklin Rosemont and the other Chicago surrealists found so interesting in the racial politics of the IWW. One didn’t cease to be black when one became a Wobbly; in the One Big Union, workers of every race, gender, faith, politics, and age simply co-existed, bound together by their experience as workers, but equally defined by their own cultural experiences which, in turn, helped to develop the broader workingclass counterculture that Franklin explores in the *Joe Hill* book. It is also what makes Joe Hill, himself, an ideal surrealist historical subject:

Part of what makes Joe Hill special is that he was ... [a] poet *and* songwriter *and* cartoonist *and* man of ideas *and* frame-up victim *and* class-war prisoner *and* martyr—not to mention immigrant, hobo, musician, composer, master of the art of Chinese cookery, and volunteer soldier in the service of the Mexican Revolution. Modest to a fault, he was an IWW Joe-of-all-trades, a specialist in nothing but being a Wobbly. He was one of those strange characters who turn up now and then in the course of history—people who, without necessarily blazing with luminosity themselves, somehow become *conductors of light* for others.⁴¹⁴

This is, of course, a best-case scenario, and there are undoubtedly both contemporary and historical accounts that make clear that the IWW didn’t always live up to the ideals of equality that the union—and its historians, Franklin Rosemont included—

⁴¹³ André Breton, “Second Manifesto of Surrealism,” 143-44.

⁴¹⁴ Franklin Rosemont, *Joe Hill*, 572.

espoused. Was Joe Hill's love of Chinese cookery really an indication of his feelings of camaraderie towards fellow workers of Asian descent? It's possible. Rosemont himself is quick to point out that Joe himself was sometimes inconsistent in his politics of equality, clearly in support of the One Big Union for all workers, but prone to sentimentality, and frequently as mired in the problematic racial and gendered language of his era as other less egalitarian poets and agitators. The real question is whether it makes a difference in the larger scope of what Rosemont is trying to accomplish in *Joe Hill*; this is not a history that's overly concerned with *facts* alone. The goal here is to understand, explain, illuminate *feelings*, as well as impressions, assumptions, and memories. It is an affective history, not just a record of a specific moment in time, but the illumination of a *trend*, not just of a particular community, but of a *culture*—a workingclass counterculture, as Rosemont calls it, that spans the entirety of the twentieth century in different forms. It is a history that begins in the present, with Rosemont's own experience of the IWW as a revolutionary site of culture and community and works backwards, looking for evidence to uphold those notions. This is American history not as it really was, but as it should have been.

In the final analysis, the *Joe Hill* book stands out as an exemplary document of American history, and of American surrealism because it presents surrealism's own vision of America—filled with random acts of solidarity, oriented around a politics of equality, and conveyed with a strong sense of humor. Through the figure of Joe Hill, the hobo-poet of the IWW, and the American answer to the *flâneur* of Paris, Rosemont defines the prehistory of Chicago surrealism, a quintessentially *American* surrealist movement. It is a point along a vast epistemological trajectory, steeped in a revolutionary workingclass culture that Franklin, Penelope, Paul, and the others *created* as they uncovered it.

And that is history from the standpoint of the imagination.

Epilogue

Like Aragon's *flâneur*, like Césaire's traveller, like James' Ishmael, and, indeed, like Wobbly Joe Hill, Franklin Rosemont was one of those privileged agents of history, through whose visage we can see more clearly the truth of the social relations around us; whose own travels and adventures serve as something of a roadmap, or perhaps a guiding constellation, to the very essence of surrealism itself.

When Franklin suddenly, and without warning, died in April of 2009, I wrote in a joint obituary and biographical statement with Paul Garon and David Roediger that:

between the history he himself helped create and the history he helped uncover, Franklin was never without a story to tell or a book to write—about the IWW, SDS, Hobohemia in Chicago, the Rebel Worker, about the past 100 years or so of radical publishing in the US, or about the international network of Surrealists who seemed to always be passing through the Rosemonts' Rogers Park home. As engaged and excited by new surrealist endeavours as he was with historical ones, Franklin was always at work responding to queries from a new generation of radicals and surrealists, and was a generous and rigorous interlocutor. In every new project, every new revolt against misery, with which he came into contact, Franklin recognized the glimmers of the free and unfettered imagination, and lent his own boundless creativity to each and every struggle around him, inspiring, sustaining, and teaching the next generation of surrealists worldwide.⁴¹⁵

Indeed, every living surrealist today—and just about anyone who ever wrote *anything* about surrealism—has probably received a letter, an email, a phone call, or a query of *some* sort

⁴¹⁵ Paul Garon, Paul, Kate Khatib, and David Roediger. "The Surreal Life of Franklin Rosemont," *CounterPunch* (April 16, 2009).

from Franklin Rosemont at one point or another. In all my visits to the house in Rogers Park (far too few of them there were, I now realize), there was never a day that I didn't walk in to find Franklin sitting at the round table in the dining room just off of the kitchen, surrounded by books, collages, and an assortment of ever-expanding houseplants, with a list of questions for me, a stack of books to explore, a sheaf of papers to pass on, or an exquisite new communiqué from a surrealist collaborator somewhere in the world to share. "Do you know..." and "Have you read..." were his constant opening lines; and more often than not, I didn't know and hadn't read, but Franklin never seemed to mind. In fact, I think he rather enjoyed educating me, helping me to begin to develop even a tenth of the breadth of knowledge and understanding of the history, development, and present day of the surrealist tradition that he held inside his head and heart. Strikingly, though, Franklin—and Penelope, too, who helped to guide and shape our discussions, and pulled us back to point when we would go far too afield from the topic we'd set out to discuss—*listened*. He was, of course, sometimes skeptical, sometimes critical of the ideas, the projects, the various plans I brought to that table, but never patronizing. Franklin was an expert on so many things, but his knowledge was always there to be used as a resource by and for others, and I rather think he considered it the duty of everyone to share the knowledge they possessed with the world at large.

The winter after Franklin died, I spent two weeks in Chicago with Penelope, writing, interviewing, and, in theory, helping to organize Franklin's papers into a comprehensible archive—a massive undertaking that I'm sorry to say I didn't make much of a dent in, given the fact that every few pages something interesting would pop up and I would have to stop, read, jot down notes, and so on. Some twenty boxes of personal correspondence, already organized by Franklin into individual folders by correspondent, and grouped by country (or

sometimes by subject, or even chronology) were piled up behind that round table waiting for me when I arrived. André and Elisa Breton, Leonora Carrington, Michael Löwy, Michel Zimbacca, Phillip Lamantia, André Tarnaud: Franklin had kept up a lively conversation with all of them, and hundreds of other surrealists and agitators around the globe. Reading some of Franklin's earliest letters, I was struck by the prevalence of those questions that I had come to know so well in my own discussions with him: "Have you read...," and "Do you know...," and sometimes, "Can you tell me...?" The range of subjects upon which Franklin questioned his willing interlocutors is dizzying: Breton's interest in jazz, Walter Benjamin's theory of history, the exact mechanics of the early surrealist games, the surrealist perspective on black emancipation, the next steps for surrealism worldwide, and on and on. And there, in a box of correspondence with various Americans, was the letter I had written with my fellow Philadelphia surrealists ten years prior, a reminder of my own earliest surrealist days, now a part of the history of the movement, like so many others.

Indeed, Franklin Rosemont was a walking archive, a collection of stories, and memories, and facts and details, all stitched together into a plaid shirt and stored in an otherwise unobtrusive house in Rogers Park. There is so much more to say and to write about Rosemont's work as a historian, about his devotion to the quest for the poetry of everyday life, of his almost single-handed feat of saving surrealism from the walls of museums, and putting it back out onto the streets and into the minds of the radical countercultural agents with which he came into contact. This work is only a very small attempt to begin the process of writing a history of Rosemont's surrealism and surrealism's America, which are almost, but not quite, the same thing; yet it is important that we begin this task somewhere, for there is much to be gained, and much that still remains to be learned.

Curriculum Vitae

Kate Khatib was born in West Palm Beach, Florida in 1977, and spent her formative years in a small farming town in south-central Kentucky. As an undergraduate at the University of Pennsylvania, she first became interested in surrealism as a political project in the context of her studies of the literary and cinematic avant garde, under the tutelage of Craig Saper and Jean-Michel Rabaté. In 2000, Khatib moved to the Netherlands to pursue a Master of Arts in Philosophy and Cultural Analysis at the Universiteit van Amsterdam, where she also completed her Master of Philosophy in Cultural Analysis under the direction of Mieke Bal and Hent de Vries, writing on Walter Benjamin's theory of language, and on his concept of epistemology, respectively. In 2003, she moved to Baltimore to pursue her PhD in Intellectual History at the Humanities Center at Johns Hopkins University.

While in Baltimore, Khatib co-founded Red Emma's Bookstore Coffeehouse and its sister projects, The 2640 Project and The Baltimore Free School. In 2008, she joined the AK Press collective as an editor and designer, where she continues to work today. Khatib is the editor of two books, *We Are Many: Reflections on Movement Strategy from Occupation to Liberation* (with Margaret Killjoy and Mike McGuire), and *The Reason Why: Ida B. Wells and the Chicago Anthropological Society*. As time permits, she serves as an adjunct instructor in the Humanistic Studies program at Maryland Institute College of Art, helping to bring a broader, de-westernized view of politics to the world of art education.